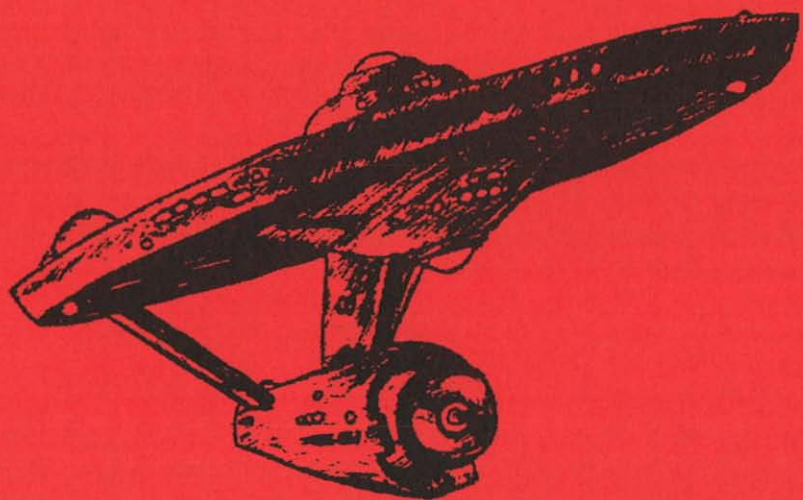


SCOTPRESS

ENTERPRISE



INCIDENTS 11

STORIES BY

JAY STEVENSEN

a STAR TREK fanzine

ENTERPRISE INCIDENTS 11

Stories by

Jay Stevensen

THE DARK INSIDE

P 3

A powerful telepathic entity plays cat and mouse with the crew of the Enterprise. Kirk, Spock and McCoy must face their deepest fears - and have complete trust on one another.

CLASSROOM

P 83

Kirk and Spock humour an alien teacher - then discover the lesson is not what they expected

A ScoTpress publication

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Proofreading - Janet Quarton, Sheila Clark & Valerie Piacentini

Printing of Masters - Janet Quarton

Printing - Urban Print, 57 Perth Road, Dundee.

Distracting - Shona and Cindy

ENTERPRISE INCIDENTS 11 is put out by ScoTpress and is available from -

Sheila Clark

6 Craigmill Cottages

Strathmartine

by Dundee

Scotland

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THE DARK INSIDE

CHAPTER ONE

Captain James Kirk said in disgust, "This is just about the worst cup of coffee I ever tasted in my life."

"There's nothing wrong with the coffee, Jim," Doctor McCoy said cheerfully. "It's your taste buds. The antidote affects them. Don't worry, it'll wear off."

"You should issue a warning with each injection, Bones. As an act of human decency."

"It doesn't affect everyone the same way," McCoy explained. "My coffee was delicious. Mind you," he added, stepping aside to let Sulu return to the helm and Kirk resume the command chair, "I did have a glass of water and it was like drinking a sample from a Genollian swamp!"

Kirk grinned. "So there is some justice in the world." He turned to Lieutenant Uhura. "Any further communication from Cerus Alpha?"

"Nothing, Captain," Uhura said. "Frequencies are still open."

The misty planet filled the viewscreen. Class M and unmapped, it appeared to have a thriving civilisation that sent out a standard - and Kirk felt rather trusting - verbal invitation to anyone within frequency range to open negotiations for future contact. Kirk knew that Spock had been unable to make a visual scan, but this was not unknown for a planet giving the outer atmosphere readings the Vulcan Science Officer was receiving.

Lieutenant Henderson and three other volunteer members of the Science Department - all of them free from the virus that had raged through the Enterprise - had beamed down in response to Cerus Alpha's request.

Kirk was waiting for their first report. The rhythm of the Bridge settled over him like a peaceful cloak. He heard Sulu and Chekov exchange a quiet joke. Uhura watched her frequency scans with relaxed attention. McCoy had wandered off to talk to one of the crewmen.

Kirk knew he should have felt as contented as any Starship Captain on active duty had a right to be but it took only a glance at Spock's glossy head bent over the scanner to warn him that the problem that had been worrying him before he went down to Sickbay had not gone away.

Spock was still checking the readings from Cerus Alpha. To anyone who did not know him well Spock's general demeanour was one of calm concentration, but Kirk had developed something of a sixth sense regarding his Vulcan second in command. In their three years of service together they had been through many dangers and had established an unspoken bond of respect and friendship. Kirk could read signs other people would miss.

Spock was fully aware that Kirk was watching him, and he knew Kirk had picked up his sense of unease. Being the Captain's friend sometimes had its disadvantages. He also knew that Human curiosity - a quality that the Starship Captain had in abundance - meant that it would not be long before Kirk said something to him.

He was right. Kirk spun the command chair round.

"Is there anything wrong with the scan, Mr Spock?"

"No, Captain," Spock said. At least with the question phrased like that he could tell the truth. "The readings are precisely what I would expect to see under the given circumstances."

"You've rechecked them twice since I came back on the Bridge." Kirk paused. "And you were checking them before I left."

Spock said carefully, "I find them... interesting."

The sour aftertaste of the coffee made Kirk feel suddenly irritable. He also had a feeling that Spock was being deliberately evasive, although he could not imagine why.

"Normal readings can't be all that interesting, Mr Spock. What's so unusual about these?"

Spock knew that Kirk was going to pursue the matter until he got an answer that satisfied him. He left his scanner and came down to stand by Kirk's chair.

"The readings are extremely accurate, Captain."

"What's wrong with that?" Kirk persisted. "It doesn't worry you, does it?" He watched his Science Officer carefully. "Does it worry you, Mr Spock?"

That was the question Spock had been hoping to avoid. The readings did bother him, and he did not understand why. It was an emotional reaction with no foundation in fact and therefore, to a Vulcan, totally unacceptable. It would

have been painfully embarrassing to admit to such feelings. He was ashamed of them. The only thing that would have dragged a confession from him was a direct order.

He realised that if Kirk pursued the matter it might come to that. He had seen the same determined look on Kirk's face before. Kirk did not like mysteries, and especially not on the Bridge.

Assuming an impassive expression Spock put his hands behind his back and got ready to attempt a diversion. He was not at all happy to note that Doctor McCoy had given up all pretence of talking to the crewman and was now ambling over to join them.

"Textbook accuracy in planetary readings to the point of, in some instances, nine decimal places is extremely rare, Captain. I cannot remember ever having recorded such an incident before. I could compute the exact odds, if you wish. Since every reading I have made is remarkable it is possible that we have set some kind of record. It will also be interesting to compare these findings with those made by Lieutenant Henderson on the planet's surface. If they are equally accurate we will have discovered a phenomenon of some considerable rarity."

"Spock," McCoy said when Spock paused for breath, "have you ever thought of going into politics?"

"I fail to see the connection between politics and planetary readings, Doctor."

"There's no connection," McCoy admitted, "but you've just demonstrated a remarkable talent for avoiding a direct question."

"Not to mention how to waffle without actually saying anything," Kirk

added. Some of his good humour had returned.

"I was merely explaining why I have appeared to be so engrossed in the data, Captain."

"You can be engrossed, Mr Spock," Kirk said, "you can be...fascinated. You can be any number of things, but you still do not have to check everything innumerable times. Rechecking your readings indicates to me that you believe something might be wrong. If that's the case I want to know about it. In fact I demand to know about it." Again his deeper knowledge of Spock made him aware that the Vulcan was hesitating. He added, "That's an order, Mr Spock."

Spock wondered briefly if even now there was a way to obey the Captain, as duty demanded, and still avoid making any reference to his own emotional reaction to the figures he kept seeing time after time on the scanner screen and the computer. The answer was not immediately apparent, and his further hesitation was not only making Kirk impatient, it was an insult to the Captain's rank.

"I'm waiting, Mr Spock," Kirk said.

The scream that ripped through the Bridge struck the entire crew like a physical blow.

Doctor McCoy literally staggered. Kirk was looking at Spock and saw the Science Officer wince. The sound sliced through his own head like a blunt blade. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Uhura clap her hands over her ears. Sulu and Chekov looked stunned. An echo seemed to cling to the air leaving a memory of terror. Kirk hoped he would never hear anything like that scream again. The silence that followed was almost as bad. It gave them all a chance to think. To

imagine. To wonder...

Kirk spun his chair towards Uhura. "Lieutenant, frequency report?"

The Communications Officer looked bemused.

"Captain... it isn't... I can't..." She shook her head as if to clear it. "That... noise... has not registered on any frequency wave."

"It must be internal." Kirk punched the controls. "Bridge to Security. Yellow alert. General search, all decks."

"Captain." Spock had returned swiftly to his instruments. His unemotional voice had a calming effect on the Bridge crew. "I do not believe a search will reveal the source of the noise we believe we heard."

McCoy looked up angrily. "Believe we heard, Spock? I did hear it. And so did you. Someone's in agony. We've got to find out who it is."

"It has not registered on any of our instruments," Spock said.

"Then there's something wrong with the instruments," McCoy insisted.

"My instruments are functioning perfectly, Captain," Uhura said.

"And so are mine," Spock added.

Voices came from the communication speakers. First Security reports, staccato and precise. Nothing registering on tricorders. Everything as it should be. And a request from one of the officers. "Henson here, sir. Can you give us some idea of what we're looking for?"

"The source of that scream," Kirk said.

"Scream, sir?" The Security man sounded surprised. "We didn't hear anything. Do you have a location?"

Spock looked at Lieutenant Uhura and raised a eyebrow. Uhura looked at Kirk and shrugged.

"I have no definite information," Kirk said. "Maintain yellow alert and keep searching. Kirk out." He turned to Spock. "Were we the only ones who heard anything?"

"I believe so, Captain."

McCoy was virtually jumping up and down with impatience.

"Does it matter who heard it? Somewhere on this ship there's a man in agony. Damn it, someone's dying!"

"That is an emotional assumption," Spock said calmly. "I maintain that the scream did not emanate from the Enterprise."

"Because it didn't register on your damned instruments?" McCoy rounded on the Vulcan furiously. "Does everything have to come up on a screen before you'll believe it?"

"No, Doctor," Spock said, unperturbed. "I am more than familiar with the possibility of a sound that registers only within the mind. In this case I am surprised that you, with your normal Human resistance to such phenomena, apparently heard it too."

"Where do you think it came from, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Since I am convinced that it did not originate on the Enterprise the most logical assumption would be that it has come from Cerus Alpha."

"The landing party?" Kirk said.

"It is a possibility, Captain."

"Lieutenant Uhura, contact Lieutenant Henderson." Kirk punched the controls. "Mr Scott, stand by. You may have to beam up the landing party in a hurry."

Scott's voice came back cheerfully. "Aye, sir." And then, "A bit of a short visit, isn't it, sir?"

"It may not seem so to them," Kirk said grimly. He turned to Spock again. "Why us? Why only the Bridge crew?"

"I do not know, Captain," Spock admitted. "One theory would be that my own mind has acted as a receiver and transmitted the sound to you. It is possible, although I have never experienced it before."

Uhura's voice was repeating with increasing urgency, "Enterprise to landing party, come in please. Enterprise to landing party, do you read me?" She turned to the Captain. "Nothing, sir. I'm using the highest frequency available. They can't have their communicators with them."

"If Lieutenant Henderson does not have his communicator," Spock said, "it must have been taken from him by force. He is a man who abides by regulations at all times."

Kirk hit the controls again. "Mr Scott, I want the landing party beamed up. If the original coordinates don't produce anything execute a full scan."

"That will take considerable time, Captain," Spock said.

"I know." Kirk stood up. "Mr Sulu, take the con. Doctor McCoy, come with

me to Sickbay. I want you to fit me with a transponder."

"You're going down?" McCoy fell in behind Kirk as they headed for the turbolift. The doors slid open.

"I'm going down," Kirk said. "And this time I want Scotty to be able to lock onto us whether we've got communicators or not."

Spock stepped into the lift a fraction ahead of the closing doors.

"You're needed on the Bridge, Mr Spock," Kirk said.

"I request permission to accompany you, Captain," Spock said formally. "Lieutenant Henderson is from my department. I feel a responsibility towards him. I also find the situation an interesting one."

It took only moments for McCoy to insert the transponders. As Kirk rolled down his sleeve he noticed the Doctor rolling up his own.

"Not you as well, Bones," he protested.

"I can still hear that scream, Jim," McCoy said soberly. "I've a feeling a medical man will be as useful as a scientist." He saw Spock raise an eyebrow and added, "More useful, probably. There are only a few more antidote injections to give and Nurse Chapel is quite capable of sticking a hypo in a man's arm."

In the transporter room they were greeted by a surprised Mr Scott.

"I'm having no luck with the scan, Captain. You're not going down as well?"

Kirk nodded. "We're all fitted with transponders, Mr Scott. If you don't hear anything from me in half an hour, beam us up, whatever our position."

"Understood, Captain." Scott did not look very happy about the situation. "I'm not sure I like this, sir. Henderson should have reported by now. Every fifteen minutes, we agreed. He's usually such a precise man."

"Phasers on heavy stun, Mr Spock," Kirk said quietly. "But don't fire unless I give the order."

Scott overheard him. "You're expecting trouble, Captain? Shall I alter the coordinates?"

"No, Scotty," Kirk said. "We're going down blind anyway. We may as well start off at the same place as Henderson."

"If there is anything unpleasant waiting for us," Spock said conversationally, "it will be as well to face it immediately."

"Why did we bring him, Jim?" McCoy asked plaintively.

Kirk smiled briefly. "He's really as worried as you are, Bones. He just disguises it better."

Spock looked mildly surprised at the idea.

Kirk turned to his Engineering Officer. "Mr Scott, stand ready to beam us up at any time. And continue that scan."

"Aye, sir."

They took their places on the transporter.

"This is a hell of a way to travel," McCoy muttered under his breath.

"Energise," Kirk said.

The floor under Kirk's feet seemed to be made of glass. The heels of his boots clicked as he moved forward with Spock and McCoy close behind him. Columns surrounded them. Multicoloured hangings drifted like streamers in a faint warm breeze. They stood surrounded by the pastel colours of the draperies and the faint scent of a flowery perfume. Above them a circular vaulted roof arched grandly, apparently made of the same glittering substance as the floor.

Spock touched one of the hangings cautiously. He took a quick reading. "Fascinating," he murmured. He examined the columns next.

"Mr Spock," Kirk asked, "are they... real?"

"They are real, Captain," Spock confirmed, "if you believe in a reality that can be measured by our senses. The tricorder readings are, however, erratic."

"What would happen if I kicked one?" McCoy asked acidly.

"You would probably break your toe, Doctor," Spock said. "They register a molecular structure of considerable density."

"They're real," McCoy agreed. "Why couldn't you just say that without all the philosophical stuff."

"Always trust the evidence of your feet, Bones," Kirk smiled briefly.

"Captain," Spock said, unemotional as always, "I register no life forms other than our own. But there is a high energy field quite close us."

A faint sound tinkled gently behind the gauzy curtains. They parted and a rotund figure appeared, swathed in robes as lightweight and iridescent as the hangings. A smooth face, almost a baby's face, beamed at them. Round blue eyes smiled.

"Welcome, gentlemen, welcome. Oh, my goodness," pudgy hands were raised in horror, "you do not need weapons. You are quite safe, I assure you. My name is Kolo. I greet you in friendship."

"I am Captain James Kirk of the Starship Enterprise," Kirk said. "This is my Science Officer Mr Spock, and my Medical Officer Doctor McCoy."

"Welcome, welcome," Kolo repeated. He clapped his hands and the hangings parted again. A cavalcade of brilliantly coloured cushions appeared, sliding over the floor like strange boats on a frozen sea. They arranged themselves in a semi-circle. The tiny figure bowed. "Please be seated, gentlemen."

Kirk exchanged a quick glance with his companions. McCoy looked as surprised as he was. Even Spock seemed faintly interested. Kirk walked across to one of the over-inflated cushions and sat down. McCoy sat beside him. The cushions supported them like a bed of air.

"And your Science Officer?" Kolo insisted.

Spock was still standing, gazing at the roof.

"Pull up a cushion, Spock," Kirk said.

Spock waved a slim hand towards the columns. "I would like to investigate, Captain," he suggested.

"Later, later," Kolo insisted. "We have nothing to hide. But later."

The Vulcan walked over to a cushion but instead of sitting on it he folded his long limbs with an unselfconscious elegance of movement that Kirk had noticed before and sat cross legged on the floor, his back straight.

Kolo looked at him and giggled, a high pitched sound. Spock gazed impassively back.

"Your friend dislikes comfort? Is it perhaps some spiritual requirement?"

"He's just a contrary Vulcan," McCoy said.

"I observe that he is not of your people. But he is welcome. All are welcome. Will you take nourishment, gentlemen?"

"We'd rather take some information," Kirk said.

"But of course. We welcome the exchange of information. Discussion. Philosophy. That is why we invited you to visit us."

"You invited a deputation from my ship," Kirk corrected him. "We've lost contact with them. We'd like to know where they are."

Kolo's face changed. It seemed to crumple. "But Captain Kirk... no-one else came with you."

"An officer from the Science Department and three researchers preceded us," Spock said.

"But I assure you, gentlemen," Kolo looked about to burst into tears, "I understand the concept of your Earth time. To use your terms, we have had no

visitors for months."

"They beamed down just on fifteen minutes ago, Earth time." Kirk's voice was grim. Suddenly the cushion seemed to be swamping him. He stood up, towering over the diminutive Kolo. Spock and McCoy stood up with him. "They are members of my crew and I'm responsible for them. I intend to find out what's happened to them."

"But there is no one," Kolo wailed. "We used up our last visitors months ago."

"Used them up?" Kirk repeated. "What exactly do you mean, used them up?"

Kolo put his hands in front of his face. "We did not mean to, Captain. We never mean to. It happens. They went... inside out."

"Jim," McCoy said, his voice harsh, "what's he talking about? Inside out? What have they done to those men?"

Suddenly Kolo moved. He rolled off the cushion and scuttled along the floor almost on all fours. Kirk fired. The phaser beam struck Kolo and seemed to go through him. Kolo gave a high pitched shriek but kept going, rolling over in his haste. Kirk fired again. Kolo disappeared among the waving draperies.

Spock reached the curtains first. He pushed them aside but they floated and clung. Light and insubstantial, they impeded him, stuck to him like webs of colour, folded round his face. Suddenly he felt them forcing into his mouth, his ears. Then he heard Kirk shouting and felt strong hands pulling him free.

"Spock?" Kirk's anxious face was close to his own. "Are you all right? Spock?"

"I am unharmed, Captain," Spock said. He brushed at his uniform, still feeling the gentle deadly embrace, and gazed speculatively at the fluttering circle of hangings surrounding them. "Fascinating."

"What do you make of this, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Nothing here is what it seems, Captain," Spock said.

"I thought you said the columns were real?" McCoy objected.

"Whatever it was that we touched had molecular density," Spock admitted, "and in that sense was real to us in tactile terms. But observe the roof. It hangs above us unsupported, yet gravitational readings for this planet imply that such a thing is impossible. Kolo was an energy form, impervious to our phasers."

"And Henderson and his men?" Kirk persisted.

"I get no readings, Captain."

"That creature, whatever it was, said they were used up," McCoy insisted. "They went... inside out, whatever that means. It sounds pretty unpleasant to me."

"I agree, Doctor," Spock said. "I have no theory to explain this. It is, at the moment, a mystery."

"We can't search for Henderson," Kirk said. "We're trapped by those damn draperies. We can't do a thing here." He opened his communicator. "Enterprise. Kirk here. Beam us up."

McCoy looked round at the pretty hangings and white columns. "And quick," he muttered. "This place gives me the heebie jeebies."

Kirk repeated, "Scotty, can you read me?" The communicator was silent. He flipped it shut. "We've lost contact."

"Thank god for the transponders," McCoy said. "Scotty will get us out in half an hour, come what may."

"You are forgetting the time difference, Doctor," Spock said. "Half an hour of Enterprise time could be many months or even years in this planet's reality. If we wait for Mr Scott's idea of half an hour to elapse we are liable to be here for a very long time."

"Spock," McCoy said, "your middle name should be Jeremiah."

"I do not have a middle name, Doctor," Spock observed, "and if I did Jeremiah, being a name of Earth origin and I believe the Jewish faith, is highly unlikely to be an option."

"I don't think we'll be allowed to stand and wait too long," Kirk said.

"No, before long we'll find out why these people use up their guests rather quickly," McCoy said.

"I don't intend to stand here waiting for something to happen," Kirk said. He moved towards the shimmering draperies.

McCoy put out a warning hand. "Careful, Jim, even Spock couldn't handle them."

"Gentlemen." The voice was deep, masculine and authoritative. "Do not be afraid. Nothing here will hurt you. Kolo has confused you." Warmth touched the words now. "Allow me to explain."

The draperies shivered and a tall figure appeared. Kirk's first impression was that he had seen this man before,

although he could not remember where. Flowing robes, shoulder length white hair, a beard, eyes that were deep and kind.

"My name is Philos. I welcome you." One hand lifted almost in a blessing. "I know your names. I know the purpose of your journey." He turned to Kirk. "You are the Captain of a Starship. It is not a concept that is familiar to me but I understand it to be a massive vessel. As Captain you must have a strong character. Am I correct? You will be capable of mastering many emotions." He turned again. "And you, Commander Spock, your mind will be filled with the intricacies of science, of logic, of calculation. A strange mind. Doctor McCoy, what emotions will crowd in on you when you deal with the lives and deaths of your fellow men? When you hold their lives in your own hands?"

"We'll try to answer your questions," Kirk said, "when you've answered ours. Where are my men?"

Philos still smiled benignly. "You are our guests. Will you eat? Sleep? Rest?"

"My men?" Kirk repeated grimly. "Where are they?"

"All questions will be answered, Captain, in time. There are formalities to be observed. You are guests."

"I don't like the way you treat your guests, Philos," Kirk said. "We feel more like prisoners."

Philos looked shocked. "But Captain, you are free to leave whenever you wish."

Kirk held out his communicator. "Then arrange for me to contact my ship."

"The instrument... it is incapacitated?"

"Yes," Kirk said shortly.

Philos looked concerned. "I am not a scientist, Captain, but I believe our current surroundings may be affecting the mechanism. It is possible that it will adjust itself when we go outside. Perhaps you would trust me, and wait and see?"

"I'd like to speak to my men," Kirk said. "The ones who beamed down to this planet at your invitation. And I'd like to do it now."

Philos said, "Surely there has been mistake? We do not get a frequent response to our universal invitation. How could those guests we received so long ago be members of your crew?"

"That's not what Kolo said," McCoy interrupted.

"Kolo is a Greeter, Doctor," Philos said. "His purpose is to make our guests comfortable. No doubt he would tell you what he felt you wanted to hear."

"He told us you used up your last visitors several months ago, Earth time," Spock said. Although he was looking at Philos Kirk noticed that his long fingers were working the tricorder. "Allowing for an apparent discrepancy in time scales on this planet it is quite logical to assume that your last guests were indeed the men we are looking for. Perhaps you could explain the phrase 'used up'?"

"Kolo was confused," Philos repeated. "We were not expecting more visitors at this time... although you are welcome, of course. And you, Captain... you radiate aggression, even anger. Kolo would not be used to such emotions. The guests who normally respond to our invitation are happy to be with us,

content to accept our hospitality and exchange philosophies. That is why we transmit our signal. Surely you approve of this?"

"You use them," Spock said. "This is your own expression."

"Not mine," Philos corrected gently. "Kolo surely meant that we use their information. We assimilate new philosophies into our own. We are constantly changing, learning, evolving. That is commendable, don't you agree?"

"You welcome anyone?" Kirk asked. "Whoever picks up your call?"

"But of course, Captain. It is part of our culture." He smiled at Spock. "Are you discovering anything of interest on that instrument of yours, Commander?"

"You are a non-human life form," Spock said. "Like Kolo, you are pure energy."

"Does that frighten you?" Philos asked gently.

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "Hardly. I would be interested to observe your real appearance."

Philos shrugged. "We consider it polite to greet guests by assuming a form that will not upset them, Commander. A form they will respond to with trust."

"And then what do you do to them?" McCoy burst out angrily. "Torture them?"

Surprisingly this evoked no angry response from Philos. "Of course not, Doctor. Why do you make such a suggestion?"

"We heard a scream," Kirk said.

"When you arrived?" Philos questioned.

"Before we beamed down. On board the Enterprise."

"Why do you connect a scream on your ship with our planet, Captain?" Philos asked mildly. "Could a sound carry that far?"

"The scream did not register on any of our instruments," Spock said, "but the entire Bridge crew heard it quite clearly. This could indicate a mind transmission."

"An interesting theory," Philos murmured.

"That might be a theory," Kirk agreed, "but it's not a theory that my men beamed down here on your invitation and no-one's seen them since."

Philos gazed at him, his face calm, and Kirk suddenly remembered a book of Old Testament stories he had read in his childhood, a book with a coloured picture of the prophet Moses. And then he knew where he had seen Philos before.

"Captain," Philos said, "we mean you no harm: It is important that you believe that."

"Kolo said the same thing," Spock remembered impassively. "But I believe that harm did come to Henderson and the landing party, whether you intended it or not."

"Gentlemen," Philos spread his hands, appealing, "how can I convince you of our good intentions?"

"By taking me to my men," Kirk said.

Suddenly Philos lifted his arms. His robes billowed. His white hair stirred

around his head.

"Very well, Captain. I will assume that the visitors we had so long ago were indeed your crewmen. Follow me. I shall show you what may well be your landing party."

He turned towards the draperies. McCoy moved closer to Kirk.

"Jim, I don't trust him. There's something wrong about all this."

"I agree, Captain," Spock said quietly. "His appearance is obviously chosen to inspire confidence in you, but he avoids answering direct questions. He has also nullified our communicators, and our phasers will have as little effect on him as they did on Kolo."

"Great, Spock." McCoy glared at the Vulcan. "You can always be relied on to inspire optimism."

Spock looked faintly surprised. "I am merely stating facts, Doctor."

"I'm interested to see what Philos is going to show us," Kirk said. "If it's Henderson and company I don't care if he is an illusion who just happens to look like the Prophet Moses."

"He is not an illusion," Spock corrected. "He is energy. How do you know he looks like a prophet from Earth's religious mythology? Surely a likeness does not exist from those times?"

"If Moses didn't look like that," McCoy said, "then he should have."

"That is a most illogical argument," Spock said.

Philos turned towards them. He beckoned. "Come, gentlemen. Do not be afraid of the draperies. They will not

harm you."

Walking through the gauzy hangings was like passing through a scented breeze. They floated and parted. There were no doors and no walls. Suddenly a warm wind touched Kirk's hair. An idyllic panorama stretched around him. Fields, trees, a winding brook with a gentle waterfall. Birds danced. The grass was threaded with flowers. Kirk and McCoy stared in amazement. Even Spock looked faintly surprised.

"Do you find our planet pleasing to you?" Philos asked. "Can you imagine anything unpleasant happening here?"

"It's very pretty," Kirk said. "Where are my men?"

Philos waved an arm. "Down there, Captain. You will find... men. But before I take you, I must ask you one question: if these are indeed members of your crew will you expect them to return with you to your Starship?"

"Of course," Kirk said.

"Maybe they will not wish to return," Philos suggested.

Kirk said, "They are all Starfleet officers. They'll obey my orders."

"You are certain of that? What would you do if they refused?"

A wave of anger gripped Kirk. "They won't refuse. Unless you've tampered with their minds."

Philos smiled gently. "Whatever we do, it is with the best of intentions, Captain. So," his smile did not waver "you are sure your men will obey you. What orders will you give them?"

"I'll have them beamed back to the Enterprise," Kirk said.

Philos nodded. He strode ahead. McCoy wandered after him, looking round. Spock moved closer to Kirk. The path wound downwards. The scent of summer engulfed them. It was too beautiful, too perfect and once again Kirk had the feeling he had seen it all before. Not on any of the planets he had visited. Not on Earth. But somewhere. It puzzled him.

"Captain," Spock said quietly, "I assume you are seeing a rather highly coloured scene with trees and flowers."

Kirk nodded.

"Interesting," Spock said. "That is exactly what I am seeing."

"And that surprises you?" Kirk wondered.

"I find it... fascinating," Spock said. "I also saw, and in fact still see, the mythical figure of your religious prophet."

"And you find that fascinating too?" Kirk asked.

"As a matter of fact, Captain, I do."

"If you have a theory, Mr Spock, I'd like to hear it."

"At the moment," Spock said, "I am still experimenting."

McCoy waited for them to catch up. "What do you make of all this, Jim?"

"It's certainly beautiful," Kirk said. "Has it calmed your heebie jeebies?"

"Well," McCoy admitted, "it's helping."

"Doctor," Spock said, "you should guard against your tendency to make emotional judgements. Unpleasant things can occur amid pleasant scenery."

"Tell you what, Jim," McCoy suggested, "let's take Henderson back and leave Spock here."

Kirk smiled. "I almost feel that you could leave me here, too, Bones."

The hills were patterned with a sweep of changing colour, wild flowers of every hue. The drowsy hum of bees soothed the air. "It's like something out of a story book."

And then he realised how accurate this was. He had seen these lush pastels before. The perfectly blue sky, the golden sun - it was an idealised landscape. It was how it should be rather than how it was. "I can't believe it's real," he said. "Doesn't it remind you of a fairy story?"

McCoy laughed. "You're right, Jim. You half expect to see a wizard, or a dragon... or at least a damsel in distress."

"Fascinating," Spock murmured.

"Of course Vulcan children never read fairy stories?" McCoy guessed. "I suppose you existed on a diet of computer manuals, Spock?"

"Not exclusively," Spock said mildly.

He let the two Humans walk ahead and stood still. After a moment he bent down and reached out his hand, pulling it back almost immediately, sharply. Looking at his fingers he saw a smudge of green Vulcan blood. He rubbed the smear away and inspected the tiny puncture that had caused it. Kirk and McCoy realised he was no longer behind them and turned round. They saw Spock

apparently staring at a clump of purple flowers.

"Collecting specimens, Mr Spock?" Kirk wondered.

"Experimenting," Spock said softly.

McCoy was about to add his own comment when Philo boomed, "Behold!" He swept his hand down towards the valley. "Are these your men, Captain Kirk?"

The Starship crew were lolling on multicoloured cushions, surrounded by bowls of food. Two of them were engaged in amorous activities with young women whose clothes could only be described as indecently scanty. A beautiful girl with raven hair sat next to Lieutenant Henderson. She held a flagon high in the air, tipped it and poured a stream of ruby liquid into Henderson's open mouth.

Spock raised both eyebrows, a sure sign of extreme surprise.

"I don't believe it!" McCoy said in amazement.

"I don't believe it either," Kirk said grimly. "It's straight out of fantasy land."

"I would not have expected to see Lieutenant Henderson behaving in this fashion," Spock said with more than a hint of disapproval. "He has a double first in science with a distinction in computer analysis."

"He's also twenty-three years old," Kirk said, "and a Human male."

Spock thought about that for a moment and nodded. "I take your point, Captain."

"And he's a Starfleet officer," Kirk finished, "unfortunately for him and his

dreams of paradise."

McCoy said, "I'm only surprised that his dreams aren't more lurid. But at least I suppose we can be sure that whoever screamed it sure wasn't anyone down there."

"These are indeed your crewmen, Captain?" Philo enquired softly.

"They are," Kirk confirmed.

"They will not want to return with you, Captain."

"They won't have any choice," Kirk said. "I take it you are going to allow me to communicate with my ship?"

Philo sighed. "I cannot persuade you to allow your men to remain? We could learn much from them." A burst of laughter came from the group below. "They are not always at play," Philo added. "We have already had many fruitful discussions." He raised a hand, anticipating Kirk's question. "No, Captain, not of a technical nature. We are not interested in technical knowledge. We value philosophy, new ideas, creativity."

"Those men were sent down to this planet at your invitation," Kirk said, "but they are Starfleet officers. They will return to my ship and make a full report on their conduct. I just hope there's a good explanation for what I'm witnessing now."

"Captain, you will not be too hard on them?"

"Starfleet regulations might be rather hard on them," Kirk said grimly.

"I have to admit a certain complicity," Philo suggested. "Perhaps we took unfair advantage of your officers. It has always been our intention that our

guests enjoy themselves. Some of them need help in order to relax."

"A form of mind control?" Spock asked.

Philos bowed. "It was our intention that they enjoyed themselves, nothing more."

"I'll bear that in mind," Kirk promised. He flipped open his communicator. Philos watched him gravely. "Kirk to Enterprise. Mr Scott, come in please."

"Scott here!" The Chief Engineer's voice was surprisingly clear.

"Beam up original landing party on these coordinates, Mr Scott," Kirk ordered. "They may be a little surprised to be back but tell them all good things come to an end, and their good thing has just ended."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk felt almost sorry for the young women left suddenly with an empty spaces where their companions had been. They looked stunned for a moment, then broke into a babble of conversation.

Philos sighed. "Are you sure I cannot persuade you to stay, Captain, and share a little of your vast experience of life with us?"

"I'm needed on my ship," Kirk said, "but we do have men whose job it is to exchange ideas. I can approach the Federation with the suggestion that they send someone out to you."

Philos bowed. "We would be honoured to welcome them, Captain."

"I'll try to arrange it," Kirk promised. He opened the communicator

again. "Mr Scott, lock in on my signal and beam us up."

Philos stepped back to watch them. His robes shifted gently in the breeze. His hair stirred like a moving halo.

He smiled benevolently.

CHAPTER TWO

Captain Kirk relaxed in his chair and the sounds of the Bridge murmured round him like a lullaby. He looked benevolently at his crew, all working at their various duties, and at the panorama of space stretching out on the viewscreen.

Sulu, Chekov, Uhura, Spock. Doctor McCoy discussing something with one of the Security men. The Enterprise rode smoothly through space. There were no problems. Everything was as it should be.

Kirk picked up the log and checked it. Response to a friendly call from Cerus Alpha. Acknowledged. Landing party sent down. Slight problem getting them to return. Lieutenant Henderson given a reprimand but due to his previous excellent record and admitted extenuating circumstances no charges made. Contact to be re-established by the Federation at some future date. No problems.

He checked it again. There was nothing wrong with the details and yet they disturbed him. Something niggled at the back of his mind. He drummed his fingers idly and turned his chair round.

"Mr Spock?"

Spock took his usual unhurried strides to the Captain's chair. He stood with his hands behind his back.

"Check the log entry for me, Mr

Spock."

If Spock was surprised at the request he showed no sign of it. He listened to the entry and handed the log back. By this time Doctor McCoy had wandered over to join them.

"Does that seem an accurate statement of events to you, Mr Spock?" Kirk asked.

"It would seem to be in accordance with the facts as I remember them, Captain."

"Why don't you just say yes?" McCoy grumbled.

"Yes," Spock said agreeably.

"That's what I thought," Kirk said. But he did not sound convinced. Spock watched him with a slightly quizzical expression. "That will be all, thank you, Mr Spock."

Kirk put the log down and stood up. He began to walk about the Bridge inspecting things, standing behind individual crew members, looking over their shoulders. If they turned he smiled at them and they smiled back. He stood behind Spock for a long time. Spock did not turn round.

"You're doing a splendid job, Mr Spock," Kirk said.

That turned Spock's head. "Thank you, Captain. Were you in some doubt about it?"

"No," Kirk said. He paused, and added slowly, "You always do a splendid job, Mr Spock."

He ambled back to his chair and Spock watched him for a moment before resuming his work.

Kirk's hand moved almost hesitantly over the control panel. He touched a switch. "Mr Scott? Is everything in order?"

Scott's voice answered, dependable as ever. "Aye, sir. She's running like a dream."

"A dream," Kirk repeated. He said suddenly, "I'll come and inspect the Engine Room, Mr Scott."

"Aye, sir."

"Mr Sulu, you have the con."

Kirk headed for the turbolift. McCoy followed him. Spock watched them while making a credible pretence of still working. They were talking amiably as they entered the lift. The doors swished shut.

Spock turned slowly back to his instruments. His fingers touched the keys and the screens displayed a succession of equations. But something was scraping at the back of his mind. He felt an uncharacteristic desire to look over his shoulder. Checking. The trouble was he did not know what he was checking for. Everything was normal. Running smoothly. The Enterprise was on course. There were no problems.

He processed another calculation then looked round again. Sulu in the command chair. Chekov navigating. Uhura, long brown legs crossed, intent on her instruments.

"Illogical," Spock said softly.

But he was not clear whether he was referring to his own unease or the scene he was observing. He pressed his fingers suddenly against his head. Pain speared him, and was gone.

When Kirk finally returned to the Bridge Spock felt even less happy. He wished Kirk would stop smiling. The contented man sitting in the command chair was not the Captain he knew. *Ever since we returned from Cerus Alpha, Spock thought suddenly, there has been something wrong with the Captain, and maybe something wrong with me...*

Pain stabbed him again, behind the eyes. He straightened and fought it. It faded. He saw Kirk looking at him. Smiling. He went down to stand behind Kirk's chair.

"Captain...?"

Kirk spun the chair to face him. His smile was almost smug. "Yes, Mr Spock?"

"Are you feeling well?"

Kirk looked surprised. "Of course." The smile at least slipped for a moment. "Why?"

Spock manipulated his words to avoid an outright lie. "Ever since we returned from Cerus Alpha I have been feeling... disorientated. A slight headache. I wondered if you felt the same?"

"Can't say I've noticed anything," Kirk admitted. "Check with Sickbay. Bones'll give you something."

"I think I would prefer the headache," Spock said.

"Can't have my Science Officer feeling off colour," Kirk objected. "You have important work to do, Mr Spock."

"I have my normal duties to perform," Spock agreed.

"You're a key member of the crew, Mr Spock." Kirk said with unusual enthusiasm. "You must be busy. We're all

busy. We all have our appointed places... our jobs... all of us." He faltered suddenly. "We must keep busy performing our duties. I must keep... the Enterprise... running efficiently." He looked at Spock and Spock gazed back, one eyebrow slightly raised. "Spock," Kirk said, "what am I talking about?"

"I was beginning to wonder, Captain," Spock admitted politely.

"And what have I been doing?" Kirk added. He sounded as if he was coming out of a dream. "Why have I been wandering around patting people on the back? I'm a ship's Captain, damn it, not a vicar." His hand went suddenly to his head and Spock saw him wince with pain. "Headache. I've got it too."

"It will be interesting to check whether Doctor McCoy is suffering from the same symptoms," Spock observed. "We might also check Henderson and the other men in the landing party."

"You think something happened to us down there, Spock?"

Spock tried to organise what were essentially irrational thoughts into some kind of scientific order.

"I have experienced a sense of unease ever since we made contact with Cerus Alpha, Captain."

"Why didn't you say something at the time?" Kirk asked.

"There was no scientific basis for my opinion."

"And now there is?"

"Your behaviour is unusual, Captain. And you are experiencing spasms of pain, just as I am. If Philos has retained some kind of control over us it

would imply an unusually high degree of telepathic ability. I find the idea unlikely but we cannot rule out the possibility."

"But why?" Kirk wondered. "What does he hope to gain by giving us a headache?"

"Captain!" Chekov's voice cut through the conversation. "Sensors are picking up a vessel on the edge of our range."

Spock sprinted back to his scanner.

"Approaching at space normal speed," Sulu reported.

Kirk forgot his worries and his headache. "Put it on visual, Mr Chekov."

The screen showed a small moving point.

"Magnification six, Mr Chekov."

Chekov increased magnification. The point of light began to take shape.

"Analysis, Mr Spock."

The light from the scanner painted Spock's face an unearthly blue. He double checked and then turned. His very calmness betrayed his amazement. "Captain, it is a Klingon battle cruiser."

"A Klingon ship?" Kirk repeated. "Out here?"

"Locked on course with us," Sulu confirmed. "Matching speed with ours."

"We are outside all treaty areas," Spock commented.

"But what would be the point of attacking us?" Kirk wondered.

"Klingons don't need a reason to

pick a fight, Captain," Chekov said grimly.

"You are repeating space prejudice, Mr Chekov," Spock said.

"Look at it, Mr Spock!" Chekov waved a hand angrily at the screen. The Klingon ship, an ominous shape, was getting larger by the second. "Does it look as if it's coming to pay a social call?"

"That's enough, Mr Chekov," Kirk said. "Lieutenant Uhura, open a hailing frequency."

"All channels open, sir, there's no response." Uhura jerked her head suddenly. "Well, some response. They're jamming."

"Sensors indicate," Spock announced calmly, "that they are also arming photon torpedoes."

Kirk slammed his hand down on the control panel. "Red alert. All hands to battle stations. This is not a drill." The siren blared. "Raise the shields, Mr Sulu."

"Shields raised, sir!"

"Lieutenant Uhura, keep all hailing frequencies open and try and get me something on visual."

"Trying, sir," Uhura confirmed. "I just don't think they want to be seen."

Kirk spun his chair. "Any theories, Mr Spock? It's a Klingon ship, but do you think it has a Klingon crew?"

"I find it difficult to believe that an Empire ship would not make contact, Captain. Klingons usually like to inform you at some length as to why they are going to kill you before they actually try to do so."

"And that's not space prejudice?" Chekov muttered under his breath.

He had forgotten the Vulcan's acute hearing.

Spock said mildly, "That is my personal experience, Mr Chekov,"

"They're closing, sir," Sulu reported. "They'll be within firing range in... sixty point two seconds."

"Increase to warp one," Kirk said. "We'll try to outrun them." He put his hand to his head, suddenly. "Not now," he muttered. "The last thing I want now is a headache."

"Warp one, sir," Sulu confirmed.

The viewscreen cleared as the Enterprise accelerated. Then the crank winged Klingon ship reappeared, rapidly growing larger.

"Pursuing vessel has increased speed, sir," Sulu reported. "Now at warp two, and closing."

Kirk shrugged. "So we won't outrun them."

"They will be within firing range in forty seconds, Captain," Spock observed conversationally.

"Damn it all," Kirk said in sudden anger, "I want contact! I want to know who I'm fighting."

"Captain," Uhura turned in her chair, "I am receiving a transmission but it's very distorted..."

"Put it on audio, Lieutenant."

A burst of static crackled on the speakers.

"Captain...?" The voice was thick and indistinct. "Captain Kirk...?"

The static increased.

"Uhura, can't you clear that frequency?" Kirk demanded.

"I'm trying, Captain. I don't understand what's causing this."

"Captain Kirk...?" The voice was stronger now, the harsh Klingon accent easily recognisable. "You do not know me, Captain... but I know you. I know your ship... You are... a great prize..."

Spock glanced at Kirk and raised an eyebrow.

"Identify yourself," Kirk ordered. "We are bound by the Organian Peace Treaty. There is no state of war between us."

"I am... Captain Koroth... Treaties do not... interest me..." Another burst of noise. The words came sporadically. "...a great game... with you as the prize... Empire... rewards... destruction... Enterprise..."

Spock nodded. "A glory hunter, Captain. If he can destroy us out here no one can disprove whatever story he tells them. He will probably get a promotion. And a medal."

"But if we destroy him," there was an unpleasant expression of anticipation on Kirk's face "...the same rules apply. Except that I don't want a promotion, or a medal. Just the pleasure of blasting him out of the sky."

Spock looked surprised. "If you destroy him, Captain, you will have to answer to Starfleet Command."

"Enemy ship changing course,

Captain!" Sulu reported. "She's bearing to port."

"Her photon torpedoes are primed, Captain," Spock reported. "Estimated firing time eight seconds."

"Hard astern, Mr Sulu!"

The Enterprise swung round and the Klingon ship fired. A shock wave rocked the Bridge, pitching Kirk forward in his chair and sending Spock backwards against the safety supports.

"Direct hit!" Sulu reported.

"Damage report, Mr Scott?" Kirk requested.

"Shields are holding, sir," the Engineer stated calmly. "Port deflector four took the main force. There appears to be a slight power drain."

"She's swinging round again, sir," Sulu reported.

Kirk punched the control panel. "Phasers on full power. Fire on my order."

The disembodied voice from the speaker confirmed, "Aye, sir!"

The Klingon ship loomed on the view screen. Kirk watched it with an expression of vicious anticipation.

"Hard aport, Mr Sulu." The Enterprise swung round. "Fire!"

A line of white light seared through space. It struck the Klingon ship and rocked it.

"A hit, sir!" Sulu reported.

The Klingon ship slid smoothly out of the viewscreen.

"Minimal damage," Spock said. "Their shields are holding, but I register a decrease in power."

"She'll lose more power each time we hit her," Kirk said. "Then we'll have her."

Scott's voice came up through the intercom. "There seems to be a drain on all our shields, sir. Recommend we hold fire until I can find the cause."

"Captain," Spock suggested, "since the Klingon ship seems to be suffering from similar problems it might be sensible to simply outrun them."

"Run away?" Kirk twisted the command chair round to face his second in command. "Is that what you're suggesting, Mr Spock?"

Spock said calmly: "Evasive action, Captain. I would remind you that we are not in a battle situation. It is not logical to risk the ship for no purpose."

Kirk's expression changed. He seemed about to say something when his hand went suddenly to his head. His fingers pressed against his skull.

"There's no risk, Mr Spock," he said thickly. "This is good practise for the crew. The Klingons want a fight, they can have a fight. We'll take the fight to them!" His hands gripped the arms of the chair, knuckles whitening. "A great prize, am I? Well, I'm not an easy win!" He punched the control panel. "Arm photon torpedoes. Stand ready to fire on my command. Mr Scott, report on deflector shield four?"

"Holding, sir," Scott said, "but it won't sustain a direct hit. We're still down on all shields. I could divert power from starboard two..."

"I want full power on frontal shields, Mr Scott, and I don't care how you get it. Take it from four if necessary."

"Aye, sir." There was a slight pause. "That'll leave us open on the port side, sir."

"I'm aware of that, Mr Scott." Kirk's smile was ugly with anticipation. "Nobody's going to get round to port. We're going straight in. Mr Chekov, keep the enemy ship directly in our sights. Mr Sulu, full ahead."

Spock was conscious of a slight sense of unreality and then a blinding pain in his head which literally rocked him on his feet. A very uncharacteristic thought flashed through his mind. Why *not* blast the Klingon ship out of existence? It had attacked them. It intended to destroy them. He was a Vulcan. Why had he suggested that his Captain run away? Was that the attitude of a loyal First Officer?

He dimly heard Kirk's order to fire. The Klingon ship loomed into view. It filled the screen with its ugly bulk. Large, ominous, the enemy. Spock watched it like a man in a bad dream. And still in a dream he saw the ship explode. A gout of white fire. An expanding circle of flame. A nova brief against the darkness of space. The shock waves rocked the Enterprise.

And then there was nothing. Silence and dark. The stars unmoving, uncaring. There would be no burial ceremonies for these Klingons. No return in honour for their ship.

"Where's your prize now?" Kirk gloated, and his smile twisted unpleasantly.

Chekov and Sulu exchanged glances and grinned.

"How are the shields, Mr Scott?"

"I think we've found the problem, sir," Scott's voice came cheerfully over the intercom. "We'll have it sorted out directly."

"Very good, Mr Scott." Kirk spun the command chair. "Report on completion. Mr Spock, take the con. This headache's beginning to annoy me. I'm going to get something from Bones."

"Sir," Spock said carefully, "I would be grateful for permission to go to my quarters."

"You're unwell, Mr Spock?" Kirk sounded concerned. "Mr Sulu, take the con. Mr Spock is coming with me to Sickbay."

"No, Captain," Spock said. "There is nothing Doctor McCoy can do for me. I request permission to spend an hour in my quarters, undisturbed. I believe it will be sufficient."

"You're being an inscrutable Vulcan, Spock." Kirk's jolly paternalism seemed to have returned. "But if that's what you want..."

"Thank you, Captain. I think it is what I... need."

Once in his cabin Spock turned off the main light. The flickering of the eternal flame, a constant reminder of his Vulcan heritage, threw shadows on the dark red walls. He lit an incense candle and took several deep breaths to calm himself. He was sweating. His heartbeat had accelerated. There were vivid images going through his head, images that he did not like or want, of the kind he thought he had banished, or at least controlled, many years ago.

He took out his meditation robe.

The action of donning the robe usually served to remind him of his intentions and calmed him. This time it did neither. The sweat ran in rivulets down his face. He checked the temperature control. Eighty degrees. For a Vulcan this was positively chilly. He remembered that he had turned it down earlier in the day when one of the science staff had brought him a paper to discuss.

He folded his long legs into a meditation posture and tried to concentrate on one of the more obscure Vulcan paradoxes. He found the act of concentration unbearably difficult. And he knew why. Now, when he needed to draw on the strength of his hard-won Vulcan discipline his Human emotions, hidden and buried for so long, were trying to surface. His mind raced and jumped. His body was slipping out of control. It horrified him.

He put both hands to his head and groaned.

Doctor McCoy was bent over an electron-microscope. He did not look up when Kirk came through the door.

"Sit down. I'll be with you in a moment."

"Interesting germs?" Kirk asked genially.

McCoy looked up then. "Oh, it's you, Jim." He pointed at the microscope. "Come and see this."

Kirk bent over the eye piece and saw a little blob floating aimlessly in slow circles. He did not find it particularly impressive.

"All right, Bones," he shrugged, standing up again, "am I suppose to gasp

with joy or react with horror?"

"That, Jim," McCoy said, "is an isolated Argellan fever virus. The major variety."

Even Kirk had heard of Argellan fever. In its extreme form it killed rapidly but, it was said, by no means rapidly enough for those unfortunate enough to contract it. All space crew were inoculated as a matter of course and Kirk had never come across any outbreaks even of the mild form which, although less painful, was equally deadly.

"I've isolated it, Jim," McCoy said with a smile of sheer pride. "No-one has managed that before. It's the first step to a cure. A major breakthrough."

"You've isolated it?" Kirk repeated. "Here? In this dispensary?" His hand went to his head as the pain suddenly bit into him. "They've been trying for years in the best laboratories we've got. And you've done it here?"

"I sure have!" McCoy agreed. He looked concerned. "You've got a headache, Jim?"

"On and off," Kirk said.

"I've had the same thing," McCoy turned to a cupboard. "I reckon we picked up something on that planet. Here," he opened a bottle, "this'll help."

Kirk took the tablets and the glass of water McCoy handed him.

"Bones, are you sure you're not mistaken about that virus?"

"Of course I'm not mistaken," McCoy grinned. "All right, it was a fluke. An accident. But who cares? It's there, isolated, and once the news gets out I'll go down in medical history!"

His enthusiasm was infectious. Kirk wondered if it was really possible. Stranger things had happened. Perhaps the professors with their complicated equipment had been trying too hard, asking the wrong questions. After all, McCoy was no dud when it came to finding antidotes.

"Mind you," McCoy said cheerfully, "if that little beauty gets out it'll go through the ship like a forest fire."

Kirk was resting his hand near to the microscope. Despite himself he moved back quickly.

McCoy grinned. "Don't worry, Jim. It won't jump off the slide and bite you." There was an almost manic jollity in his voice. "You're quite safe."

"I hope we're all safe," Kirk said.

"You worry too much," McCoy soothed. He went over to his personal locker and opened it. "Have a drink. Celebrate."

"Not now," Kirk said. The sight of the microscope and the knowledge that instant death was captured on that small glass slide was disturbing him. "I must get back to the Bridge. Spock's gone off to his cabin for a bit of Vulcan self healing. I offered him your services but he didn't seem too keen."

"Headache?" McCoy guessed. When Kirk nodded he added, "I was right. It's something we picked up on that planet."

"Spock had another idea," Kirk remembered. "He thought Philos might have some kind of telepathic control..." He tailed off. He could not remember what Spock had said. And it sounded ridiculous. How could a man, an energy force, or whatever Philos was, affect them out here in space? They'd gone into warp

speed. They could forget about Cerus Alpha.

"Spock thinks too much," McCoy said. "He's too damn serious. He ought to try and laugh once in a while."

"You're sure that virus is safe, Bones?" Kirk insisted.

"I'll have it in the isolation safe in five minutes," McCoy promised, "and there it'll stay until I can hand it to the proper authorities." His hand closed round the Saurian brandy bottle. "Sure you won't join me in a little toast?"

"I'd like to," Kirk smiled, "but a drunk Captain's bad for morale. I'll have to get back to the Bridge."

The grin stayed on McCoy's face after the door had closed. He uncorked the brandy and poured a small measure.

"Here's to you, Doctor Leonard McCoy," he announced cheerfully. "No more Argellan fever epidemics! Thank you, Doctor Leonard McCoy!"

He swallowed the brandy. It had a pleasantly warming effect. He looked at the bottle. There wasn't a great deal left. It seemed a pity to save such a small amount.

"Celebrate!" he said decisively. "Why not? Can't do it on my own, though." He grabbed the brandy bottle round the neck and headed for the door. "Let's find some company!"

The party in the Rest and Recreation room was going at full swing. McCoy's original brandy bottle had long ago ended up in the refuse hatch. Several other bottles of assorted interplanetary beverages had followed it. The group

consisted mainly of Security men who remained soberly on duty for long periods and liked to reverse the procedure when they got the chance, and various ensigns and lower ranks. McCoy, as ship's surgeon, knew most of them. He bought them drinks. They bought him drinks. The party became very convivial in a very short time.

The computer's announcement that a new rest and recreation period was starting finally stopped the conversation, the laughter, the tall stories, and the decision to open another bottle. The group broke up in a chorus of laughter and some repeat congratulations from the few who remembered what they had originally been celebrating.

McCoy was happy. He did not let his hair down very often but he felt that it was justified this time. An isolated Argellan fever virus... it didn't seem possible. The start of a headache touched him. That didn't surprise him either.

"McCoy," he said to himself, "you old son of a gun, you deserve a headache. And you deserve the Delhasian Medical Research Prize. And you might even *get* the Delhasian Medical Research Prize. And the next time there's an epidemic of Argellan fever, hundreds of people will remember you, hundreds of people will owe you their lives. You'll still be saving lives, even when you're dead!"

He bowed down the corridor towards Sickbay in splendid good humour. Even the idea of an epidemic sounded good. He imagined all those patients in the first throes of the disease: the boils, the cramping pains, the rising temperatures... and his discovery saving them. He almost wished an outbreak of Argellan fever would start on the Enterprise so that he could save the entire crew, conveniently forgetting that so far he had only isolated the virus, not

discovered an actual cure.

Cheerfully he pushed open the Sickbay door.

And stopped in his tracks.

Two figures stood in the semi-darkness. They kissed, deeply and passionately. The man was tall with glossy black hair, the woman blonde. McCoy stood frozen, unable and unwilling to believe his eyes. He discovered for the first time in his life that being struck dumb with amazement was not just a metaphor.

The man glanced up.

He said, "It would have been better if you had knocked."

McCoy managed one word. It came out like a croak. "Spock?"

Spock smiled. It was a mocking smile with no warmth in it. It gave him a stranger's face.

"What's the matter, Doctor? You know how she feels about me. Why shouldn't I take advantage of it?"

McCoy was well aware of the way his nurse felt about the Vulcan Science Officer. He was also aware that Christine Chapel, a sensible and highly intelligent woman, knew her feelings would never be returned. Now he watched in horror as Spock pushed her backwards towards one of the Sickbay beds. She offered no resistance. Her eyes were closed. McCoy had a wild thought that Spock had hypnotised her.

Spock said lazily, "Don't act surprised, Doctor. This could happen any time. Think about it. Maybe it's happened before."

"No!" McCoy felt as if he was choking.

There was a pain in his head, a whirling. He saw a cavern and dark walls, then Spock with Christine Chapel. He suddenly remembered when he had seen that predatory smile on Spock's face before. The Vulcan had been acting as host to an alien consciousness named Henoah, and had nearly lost his own life in the process. It was like watching Henoah now. Spock's hand grasped the neck of Christine's uniform and pulled viciously. The cloth ripped.

"No!" McCoy groaned. "No! I won't believe this."

"Why not, Doctor?" Spock's fingers slid down Christine's spine. "I'm half Human, after all."

McCoy's mouth felt as if it was full of gravel. A blinding pain shot through his head. The cavern appeared again, then columns, draperies and in quick succession: idyllic scenery; Henderson and the the crewmen frolicking on Cerus Alpha; and Christine and Spock, their bodies moving slowly. Spock with one hand pushing the blonde nurse backwards. In a moment Christine would lose her balance, McCoy thought. She would end up on the bed. And Spock...?

He shouted in a sudden fury, "No!" And again, "No...no!" Pain ravaged his head. "I'm hallucinating... I'm drunk... mind's playing tricks."

The whole of Sickbay seemed to waver in and out of focus. McCoy staggered, pressing his palms against his skull, eyes closed. "No," he moaned. "It's a trick. A trick."

Spock's voice seemed to come from a long way away. "What do you see, Doctor? Tell me."

McCoy's head was full of images. "I'm going mad," he muttered thickly.

"No, Doctor," the Vulcan sounded unexpectedly compassionate, "you are becoming sane. Look at me."

McCoy forced his eyes open. His vision cleared. Spock was standing in front of him. The Spock he had always known, calm and controlled. And alone.

McCoy said huskily, "What happened?" He looked round the Sickbay. "Where's Nurse Chapel?"

"On the Enterprise," Spock said.

McCoy shook his head to clear it. It felt as if someone had released a clamp from his brain.

"We're all on the Enterprise, Spock." He stared at the Vulcan's impassive face. It was impossible to imagine this Spock kissing anyone. He asked, bemused, "What's going on round here?"

"I do have a hypothesis, Doctor," Spock admitted.

"Well, let's hear it," McCoy said. "All I've got is a headache and a lot of confusion."

"Your confusion is understandable, Doctor. You have been behaving in a totally irrational manner. That was why I staged my charade. I hoped to shock you back to normality."

"And I'm normal now?" McCoy wondered.

"Almost," Spock said.

"The fever virus..." McCoy put his hand to his head. "The Argellan virus... I thought... I believed... I'd isolated it."

"And do you still believe it?" Spock asked politely. said.

"With the equipment I've got in my dispensary?" McCoy almost laughed. "You're kidding!" He stared at Spock. "But I did believe it. Why? Am I really that gullible?"

"You have been existing in a controlled illusion," Spock said. "In fact, we are all still trapped in an illusory world created by the entity I will call Philos. This is most certainly not the Enterprise."

McCoy looked round at the familiar Sickbay. "An illusion? Well, it sure is a good one."

But as he spoke he knew there was something wrong. Something that he had noticed before, only he was so busy with his Argellan virus that he had not bothered to pursue it. He looked again. The polarisation unit. It was standing near his drugs cabinet. And it shouldn't be. He had moved it quite recently but he was so used to its old position that he was always turning round only to find that it was no longer there. In fact it had become so annoying he was thinking of moving it back. Philos had designed the Sickbay from his own memories, and had put the unit where he still instinctively imagined it to be.

"Well, son of a gun!" McCoy said softly. "Where the heck are we, Spock?"

"I believe our bodies are still in the cave," Spock said. "They have been there ever since we beamed down."

"And everything from then on was an illusion?"

"That is my hypothesis, Doctor."

"It's pretty damn realistic," McCoy

agreed. He paused. "And extremely dangerous for us."

"That's what I was afraid of," McCoy said. "I take it you don't think Philos will just play a few games and let us go?"

"I do not think Philos is playing games," Spock said.

"Then what is the point of all this?" McCoy wondered. "That logical Vulcan mind of yours must have worked out an answer by now."

"I have evolved a theory based on the facts currently available," Spock said. "To put it succinctly I believe Philos is feeding off our emotions. He is deliberately creating realities to which we will respond. A Klingon attack, an amazing medical breakthrough, a party. But this is just the beginning. Having experienced these he will undoubtedly want more. He will produce new scenarios, and we will respond to them. When he suspects we are questioning events he blocks us with the now-familiar headaches and then distracts us with a new excitement. But he will grow tired of these relatively mild forms of amusement. He will increase the pressure. He will search deeper for experiences that will produce more extreme results. Do you recall the entity Kolo saying that they used up their guests rather quickly? The term 'inside out' was used. I found it puzzling at the time."

"Me too," McCoy said. "But it didn't sound pleasant."

"If my theory is correct, Doctor," Spock said, "it is not pleasant at all. There are aspects of our minds that are best left

undisturbed. Our consciousness suppresses them. It may be that Philos can weaken this control, and not only bring these aspects to the surface but make them as real to us as this Enterprise is at the moment."

"We'd have to confront our hidden nightmares, eh?" McCoy didn't like the sound of it. He remembered the scream. Remembered it far too well. "The landing party?" he guessed. "The real one, not the illusions Philos showed us. Do you reckon that's what happened to them?"

"I am sure of it," Spock nodded. "I cannot guess what environment Philos created for them. It might not have been the Enterprise. If you remember he seemed fascinated by the idea of a Starship Captain and the excitement of life on a space vessel. This would indicate that he had not experienced it before. He needed to watch us for a time to try to understand us. He sent Jim wandering about in a most uncharacteristic fashion and by doing so first alerted me to the fact that something was wrong."

"It was lucky he couldn't get to you," McCoy said, sincerely. "I always knew all that Vulcan mind control stuff would come in useful one day."

Spock remembered how close he had come to being overwhelmed by the battering of images he had received from Philos. Images that had been probed from dark regions Spock had trained himself to forget. He had survived, but the memory stayed with him. The danger was not over. He had bought time, but how much?

He said impassively, "Your praise is unwarranted, Doctor. I was not immune to Philos. My Vulcan training enabled me to keep my mind clear for a longer period, that is all. I recognised the signs and was able to act on them. Had I been

able to retain a more rigid control I might have been able to act sooner. I would suggest that we act promptly now. Jim is still trapped in the illusory Enterprise. Before long Philos will think up something else for him to experience. He may also wonder why he has lost contact with us."

"Perhaps he's realised it already," McCoy said.

"It is possible," Spock agreed. "But I believe we have an added strength together. We are linked in this illusion."

"And with Jim free do you think we'll be able to escape?"

Spock said unemotionally, "I cannot answer that, Doctor. I have never experienced anything like this before. Philos has tremendous telepathic strength. I am totally unable to predict the extent of his power."

"I suppose it was stupid of me to expect you to cheer me up by just saying yes," McCoy grumbled. "What have we got to do to snap Jim out of his dream world?"

"Judging by my success with you," Spock said, "we must provide him with a situation he cannot rationally accept, either visually or subconsciously. But it must not be something that he will reject outright as totally impossible."

"Well, at least that means you're not planing to kiss me," McCoy said facetiously.

Spock gave him a look that would have doused a volcano. "This is no time for levity, Doctor."

"I'm sorry," McCoy said. "The truth is, I'm nervous. No, dammit, I'm scared! What if it doesn't work? What if Philos

grabs us again?"

The Vulcan's voice warmed slightly. "I am also experiencing some apprehension, Doctor. But I would appreciate any sensible suggestions."

"Should we both be in it together?" McCoy wondered.

"That might reinforce the credibility factor."

"How about mutiny?" McCoy suggested. "You're tired of being second in command...?"

"The Captain knows I have no desire to command the Enterprise."

"You could've changed your mind," McCoy said irritably.

"Unlikely."

"All right," McCoy said, "make an attempt on his life."

"I do not think the Captain will find that credible."

"You tried it before," McCoy reminded him.

"The circumstances were somewhat different," Spock said.

Yes, McCoy thought, they certainly were. He remembered the hot thin air of Vulcan. The ringing of the ceremonial gong. The challenge that Kirk had not fully understood; his agreement to fight Spock without realising that it was a fight to the death and that Spock, in the grip of the blood-fever, the plak-tow, would certainly try to kill him. During the savage barbarity of the contest that followed it was his own medical subterfuge that had saved Kirk's life.

"I was... not myself," Spock added thoughtfully. "A kind of... insanity." He looked at McCoy. "Maybe that is the answer. What would Jim do if I were to behave in a totally irrational fashion?"

"Tell me to take you to Sickbay for tests," McCoy said.

"And if you did not?"

"What else would I do with a sick man?" McCoy asked crossly.

"Refuse to help him," Spock said. "I shall attack the Captain and you will claim that I am insane, or ill, or any other explanation that that seems credible to you, and you will refuse to help me. You will behave in a totally uncharacteristic fashion." He added politely, "In the interests of realism I might strike out at you."

"Just make sure you miss," McCoy said grimly.

Spock turned towards the door.

"Spock," McCoy said, "I don't like this, it's too vague. What happens if it doesn't work?"

"Doctor," Spock said, "it has got to work. I do not believe we shall get a second chance. Philos does not yet seem to suspect that we have escaped him. But he will. And when he does he will undoubtedly tighten his hold on us. I believe it will then be impossible to escape. We shall be trapped here, locked in whatever illusions he provides for us, forever. Or perhaps it might be more appropriate to say for whatever short time remains of our lives."

CHAPTER THREE

Kirk was in the command chair when Spock and McCoy entered the Bridge. McCoy felt as if all eyes were on him, suspecting that he was somehow different from them, but every time he looked directly at one of the crew they were working quietly and efficiently, ignoring him.

He glanced at Lieutenant Uhura. She appeared to be as solid - and as attractive - as ever. Sulu and Chekov were talking quietly. As he watched Sulu said something to the Russian, who grinned and replied.

McCoy shook himself and turned to Spock. And out of the corner of his eye he noticed that Sulu and Chekov seemed to waver in and out of focus as his attention shifted from them. He glanced back and they were solid again. With his new knowledge he realised that this applied to everyone else on the Bridge except for the Captain, Spock and himself

Then he saw Spock move. Long strides took him to the command chair. Kirk spun round to face him smiling, unsuspecting. Spock's hands reached out and grasped Kirk violently round the neck.

"Enough!" he said, and the word was like an insult. "Illogical commands! Human errors! I have tolerated too much of it! Now it ends!"

Kirk's mouth opened in an attempt to speak but the long fingers tightened round his throat and he choked instead. His foot came up fast. He placed it against Spock's stomach and pushed. It forced Spock back and loosened his grip, giving Kirk enough time to get to his feet.

"Spock...?" His voice was more concerned than angry.

Spock swung his fist and Kirk ducked. He blocked the second blow, backed and half turned. His eyes caught McCoy's, briefly. McCoy saw amazement... and shock.

"Bones... do something. Hypo..."

Spock punched him in the mouth and he fell. At the same moment two Security men flung themselves on the Vulcan, their combined weight sending him to the ground. McCoy knew this was exactly what Kirk would have expected to happen. For Kirk this was still reality.

Spock threw one of the Security men off his back, literally. The man somersaulted, hit his head with a sickening thump and collapsed in a heap. McCoy made an instinctive movement towards him then checked himself.

"Illusion," he muttered

But it was still hard to believe. Especially when he saw two crew members rush over to help.

The other man twisted Spock's arm into a lock that McCoy knew would never have restrained the Vulcan under normal circumstances. But Spock stopped trying to fight and allowed the man to force him to his knees.

Kirk wiped the blood from his face. "Bones, what's going on? Is Spock ill?"

McCoy shrugged. "Not that I know of. He looks perfectly normal to me."

"Normal?" Kirk repeated incredulously. "You call this behaviour normal?"

"Well, it doesn't surprise me," McCoy said, improvising. "He's been ranting on about you all day. I must admit I didn't think he'd resort to

violence, but then you never know with aliens."

"For god's sake, Bones!" Kirk exploded. "Aliens?"

"Well... halfbreeds," McCoy expounded. "Mixing blood doesn't work. Never has and never will. You get the worst of both worlds. We should keep the blood pure, Jim. It's the only way."

"You've gone mad too," Kirk said. He turned to the Security man. "Escort Mr Spock to Sickbay and tell Doctor M'Benga to run full tests on him. Bones, I don't want to order you to have a check up, I'd rather you did it voluntarily, but I will order it if I have to."

Spock and McCoy exchanged a brief glance. McCoy felt a stab of frustration as he looked back at Kirk. Why, he thought, must you always believe the best of people?

Aloud he said, "I'll have any tests you like. There's nothing wrong with me." He moved closer to Spock. "But I won't waste any medical supplies on this freak!"

He saw Kirk flinch, but he knew it wasn't enough. Kirk was still trying to convince himself that his First Officer had probably suffered the Vulcan equivalent of a brainstorm, and the Ship's Surgeon was delirious from some unknown infection.

"There's only one kind of medicine for halfcaste Vulcans," McCoy said pleasantly. "Watch, and I'll show you."

He swung his foot back and aimed a kick at Spock. He knew he had to make it look convincing and he thought he had judged the distance correctly, consoling himself with the knowledge that Spock had a high resistance to pain, but the

Security man moved at the same time, pushing his prisoner forward. McCoy's foot hit Spock in the ribs with far more force than he ever intended. The Security man was surprised enough to let Spock go. Spock fell forward on his knees and doubled over.

And Kirk staggered. McCoy was briefly conscious of a shudder running through the Bridge. Of the walls and panels and the staring crew members, of everything except the three of them shifting focus, shimmering. He thought in triumph, *We've done it!*

Then the Bridge stabilised. He saw Spock looking up at him, his mouth silently ordering, "Again...! Now...!"

Again? McCoy thought, with a sudden rush of anger. *How much does it take, Jim? Do you really believe I'm capable of acting like this?*

He took a step forward and was amazed to see Spock cringe away from him, his arm raised to protect his face.

The Bridge shivered, more violently this time.

McCoy swung his foot back

Spock fell forward on his hands and knees, crawling. He whined, "Don't... don't hurt me... please..."

McCoy's foot never landed. The Bridge wavered like a scene painted on a shaking curtain. Kirk put his hands to his head and his legs began to buckle. He sprawled back in the command chair. Behind him the Security man blurred, a mirage about to fade.

The Bridge shivered again. McCoy saw spinning colours, draperies rippling like rainbow waterfalls, but with darkness lurking behind. Kirk looked

down at Spock in total bewilderment.

"It's all false, Jim," Spock said. "It's all an illusion."

The Enterprise disappeared.

They lay in the darkness of the cave. Spock was the first to recover. He got up quickly and checked that both Kirk and McCoy were breathing regularly, then he stood for a few minutes performing a mind control technique learned on Vulcan. It had helped him before. It helped him now.

Kirk groaned and rolled over. Spock knelt beside him.

"Captain?" Overcoming his natural dislike of touching people he pulled Kirk upright and shook him. "Captain, wake up. Open your eyes."

Kirk rolled groggily in his grasp, his mouth slack, his eyes still shut. Spock was obliged to subdue another inhibition. He slapped Kirk hard across the face. "Captain! Jim! Wake up!"

The second slap opened Kirk's eyes. He made an involuntary movement to strike back, saw Spock and looked confused.

"What's going on? Where am I?" Clarity returned. "Spock, did you just hit me?"

"Twice, Captain," Spock admitted. "It was necessary to revive you. I am aware that I have committed a court martial offence."

"You certainly have," Kirk agreed, rubbing his face. "So you might as well make the most of it and beat up Doctor McCoy as well."

But McCoy was already coming round. He sat up and groaned.

"My head... it's splitting. Where am I?"

"Well, come on, Spock," Kirk encouraged. "Where are we?"

"Exactly where I expected us to be," Spock said. "At our beam down point. Can you recall anything that happened to you, Captain? Or you, Doctor McCoy?"

"I remember..." McCoy began. "I remember some kind of garden."

"I remember the Enterprise," Kirk said. "Klingons. A Klingon ship."

"And the Argellan fever virus..." McCoy rubbed his hands over his face. "It doesn't make sense..." Another memory returned. "I kicked you, Spock. I'm sorry."

"Apologies are unnecessary," Spock said. "You did quite well under the circumstances. I did, however, feel that the term halfbreed was ill chosen."

"And... Christine?" McCoy stared at Spock in amazement. "Spock... I remember something about Nurse Chapel..."

"Illusions, Doctor."

"And my Klingon ship?" Kirk asked.

"Illusion, Captain."

"I blasted it out of the sky!" Kirk said.

"You have not moved from this area, Captain."

"Where's the Enterprise, Spock?" Kirk demanded.

"Logic would indicate that the Enterprise is still in orbit."

"We came down here to look for someone?" Kirk searched his gradually returning memory. "Henderson. The landing party. Where are they?"

"Based on our own experiences, Captain, I would say that they are probably dead. And even if they are not there is no way we can look for them."

"Why not?" McCoy demanded. "We can try, can't we?"

Spock said patiently, "There does not appear to be any way out of this cave."

"There's got to be!" McCoy interrupted. "We got in here, didn't we?"

"If you would allow me to finish," Spock continued evenly, "I was about to say there does not appear to be any way out of this cave other than the way we came in."

"We beamed in, Spock. How are we going to beam out again?"

"By giving Mr Scott our coordinates."

"How?" McCoy demanded. "By telepathy?"

"Unfortunately that method is not practical," Spock admitted. "However, using a communicator will achieve the same result."

"You've got your communicator, Spock?" Kirk asked in surprise.

"We all have our communicators, Captain. But if Doctor McCoy takes another step backwards it is likely that he will step on his."

McCoy spun round. The three communicators were lying near the wall. Kirk moved forward cautiously and picked one up.

"This isn't just another illusion, is it Spock?"

"I do not think so," Spock said.

"Let's see," Kirk said. He flipped the communicator open. "Kirk to Enterprise. Can you read me?"

"Scott here!" The Engineer's voice came through cheerfully.

"Lock in on our communicators, Scotty, and beam us up fast."

"Already, sir?" Scott sounded amazed. "Aye, sir. Locking on now."

Kirk felt the familiar tingle and then the transporter room appeared around them.

"That was a real short trip, sir," Scott said as they stepped off the pads. "Nothing much could have happened to you, that's for sure!"

They were in the briefing room, fortified by coffee. Kirk was pleased to discover that his taste buds appeared to have returned to normal.

"All right, Mr Spock," he said. "Explanations."

"Hypotheses, Captain," Spock corrected.

"You're suggesting that everything we saw on Cerus Alpha was an illusion?"

"I believe so, Captain, apart from the walls of the cave."

"And the being called Philos controlled us to the extent that we all believed we were on the Enterprise?"

"Affirmative, Captain. I would even suggest that he was controlling us while we were in orbit. At all times he endeavoured to show us what we expected to see."

"The perfect planetary readings?" Kirk remembered.

Spock looked briefly uncomfortable. "Yes, Captain."

He hesitated, and Kirk stared at him in surprise. Again his deeper knowledge of the Vulcan made him aware of a conflict in Spock that others would not have noticed.

"And later, on the planet's surface, there were other indications. If you remember, you saw an idealised landscape, probably extracted by Philos from some past memory or maybe, as I believe you suggested at the time, from a fictional book. I also saw it although it had no place in my subconscious. But later I tried an experiment and concentrated on seeing a ky'ta plant, a form of cactus native to Vulcan with particularly unpleasant spikes, and I not only saw the plant, but felt it. It punctured my finger and I bled, indicating a very strong control over our minds, my own included. I did not, I admit, appreciate the extent of this control. I certainly believed that we were actively walking on the planet's surface although what we were seeing was not necessarily an independent reality. However I should have mentioned all these things to you."

"Would that have helped us, Mr Spock?" Kirk wondered.

"It was my duty as your Science

Officer to acquaint you with as many facts as possible, Captain. The knowledge might have enabled us to work together and escape sooner," Spock said. "The fact that we were linked gave Philos more power over us, but also gave us the strength once we realised what was happening."

"Gave you strength, you mean," Kirk said. "I believe we owe you our lives, Mr Spock."

Spock shifted in his chair. He avoided Kirk's eyes.

"Your thanks are unwarranted, Captain. I did very little. Each of you saved yourself."

"Oh, come on now, Spock," McCoy insisted. "You cottoned on to what was happening first." He added, casually, "It couldn't have been easy for you... I mean Nurse Chapel's a very attractive lady, but I've got to admit she's probably not really your type..."

Spock froze him with an icy stare. Kirk looked at Spock and smiled slowly. Spock looked over the Captain's head, a model of Vulcan aloofness. Kirk turned to McCoy.

"Come on, Bones. Explain."

"I'll tell you later," McCoy promised.

Frost glittered round the edge of Spock's words. "You will do no such thing, Doctor."

McCoy took pity on him. "You're right. I won't. Sorry, Jim. Medical ethics."

"You didn't behave like a Human for once, Mr Spock?" Kirk prompted.

"I did what I considered necessary

to help Doctor McCoy break free from his illusions," Spock said evenly. "I am pleased that it was successful. I did not, however, enjoy it."

"We won't tell Christine that," McCoy said.

"Since Nurse Chapel was not involved," Spock said, "it should not be necessary to tell her anything.

"And are we free from our illusions now, Spock?" Kirk wondered. "Are we really free?" He banged the table. "This feels solid enough, but so did the other Enterprise."

"I believe we are safe now, Captain," Spock confirmed.

"Philos obviously didn't want military or technical knowledge," Kirk said. "Apart from a bit of vicarious living at our expense, what did he gain?"

"What do you gain by injecting your veins with a substance that will fill your head with illusions?" Spock asked mildly.

"Drug addiction?" Kirk said, in disbelief.

"That is a relevant parallel," Spock said. "Remember, everything that Philos did was designed to evoke emotion. It was mild enough to begin with but like all addicts he soon needed stronger stimulus. He forced us to dig deeper into our minds, to experience less pleasant aspects of our personalities."

"You're right," Kirk said, after a pause. "I wanted to smash that Klingon ship. I wanted to blast it out of the sky. I'm not sure I would have stopped even if it had surrendered."

"And I believed I had isolated that damned virus," McCoy admitted. "I was

so pleased with myself, so full of pride, I could see the medical honours piling up."

"Neither was I immune," Spock said quietly. "During the battle with the Klingon ship I experienced a strongly aggressive impulse to see it destroyed."

"And you believe the illusions would have continued?" Kirk said. "Forcing us to supply Philos with stronger and stronger emotions until we went mad?"

"That is my hypothesis, Captain. Once the cycle had started I do not believe Philos could stop it any more than a drug addict can cure himself. Perhaps Kolo was right when he claimed they did not intend to harm their guests, but they obviously cannot control their impulses. They are highly dangerous. We do not know how many space crew they have previously drawn into orbit by their supposedly friendly invitations and then destroyed. Starfleet must be warned. This planet must be quarantined."

"Agreed," Kirk stood up. The memory of the scream still clung inside his head. He turned to the door. "We'll quarantine the area and the Federation can get their psychologists to do a survey. Personally I won't be sorry to get away from here and the sooner the better."

Captain James Kirk looked round the Bridge and felt relieved at the normality of what he saw. Cerus Alpha still filled the viewscreen. Kirk knew he would feel happier when it disappeared, shrunk back into the depths of space as the Enterprise entered warp speed.

He finished his log entry and handed it to the young Yeoman standing next to him.

"Warp one, Mr Sulu." He leaned back in his chair. "Get us out of here."

The next moment he was flung forward with a force that almost landed him on his Helmsman's back. The lights on the Bridge dimmed and flickered. He vaguely saw Spock picking himself up from the deck when the Enterprise lurched again, throwing him backwards towards the command chair.

Another violent convulsion. The Bridge crew clung on to whatever handholds they could find. Lieutenant Uhura lay sprawled by her chair, her head oozing blood.

As suddenly as it had started the violent movement stopped. The crew picked themselves up. Kirk took one look at Uhura and punched the control panel.

"McCoy to Bridge!" He turned to Spock, who was nearest to Uhura. "Is the Lieutenant all right, Mr Spock?"

"I believe so, Captain. A minor flesh wound. She knocked herself unconscious when she fell."

Uhura was already coming round. Spock helped her to her chair.

"McCoy's on his way," Kirk said.

"I'll be fine, Captain," the Communications Officer said groggily. She touched her head gingerly. "Oh, am I going to have a headache!"

McCoy came out of the turbolift. "Where's my patient?" He saw Uhura and went over to her. "Haven't you learned how to drive this ship yet, Jim? My dispensary's in a fine mess!"

"Engineering?" Kirk punched the control panel. "Scotty? What happened?"

The Chief Engineer's voice came through the speaker plaintively. "I don't know, Captain. I just don't know. We went into retro-thrust while the forward boosters were operative. And that can't happen. Well, not unless I throw the switches manually."

"What do you mean, it can't happen?" Kirk said shortly. "It did happen. You just said so."

"It can't happen, Captain," Scott said. "I would never do it. We could have blown ourselves up!"

"If you didn't do it, who did?" Kirk demanded.

"I don't know, Captain." It obviously hurt Scott to make this admission. "I was the only one close enough to the control panel. I just don't understand it."

Kirk turned. Spock was staring at him gravely.

"Mr Spock?" It was a plea for help. A plea for confirmation of something that no-one else on the Bridge except Doctor McCoy would understand. "Spock...?"

"This is the real Enterprise, Jim," Spock said softly. "I am certain of it."

"We're still very close to Cerus Alpha."

Spock nodded. Kirk seemed to draw strength from his Vulcan first officer.

"Any hypotheses, Mr Spock?"

"I regret to say that I have," Spock said.

"Care to explain?"

"I would prefer to investigate

further."

"Then let's go check with Mr Scott," Kirk said.

They found the Chief Engineer in state of confusion.

"Captain, I don't claim to be infallible, but to go into retro-thrust with the boosters on... even a raw cadet wouldn't do a thing like that."

"As far as you remember, Mr Scott," Spock recapped, "were you close to the retro-thrust controls when the incident occurred?"

"I was standing in front of them," Scott said, "and the strange thing is, I don't know why. As far as I remember I was going to adjust the energy drain."

"Do you remember if you did so?"

"Yes," Scott said definitely. "Yes. I'm certain of it."

"I believe that instead you fired the retro-thrust, Mr Scott," Spock said evenly.

"Mr Spock!" Scott sounded more hurt than angry. "I've been an engineer for over twenty years, and Chief Engineer for more than half that time. How can you accuse me of such a thing?"

"You must believe me," Spock said, "when I tell you that I am certain you did do it, but while you were firing the retro-thrust you believed you were adjusting the energy drain."

"Then what the devil is happening to me, Mr Spock?" Scott demanded angrily. "Am I going mad?"

"No, Mr Scott," Spock said. "But we are all in danger. It is imperative that no one touches anything in the Engine Room

until the Captain confirms that it is safe. Please impress this most strongly on all Engineering crew."

Still looking bemused, Scott nodded. "If you say so, Mr Spock."

"And then come to the briefing room," Kirk added. "We've got some serious thinking to do."

"And some serious explaining too, I hope," Scott said. "If we can't tell one control from another on this ship we're going to be in deep trouble. Very deep trouble indeed."

"So that's it," Kirk said, looking round at the startled faces of his senior officers, Uhura with a plaster on her head, Spock, Doctor McCoy, Mr Scott, the Chief of Security. With the exception of the Vulcan First Officer they all stared at their Captain with expressions of dismay and amazement.

"Mr Spock believes that we are still controlled by Cerus Alpha. Whether you can class the energy source that we call Philos as one being or many, he does not intend us to leave. He can access the minds of crew, all of us, from the Bridge down to the lowest ranking ensign, and as long as he can do that, none of us are safe."

"But Captain," Lieutenant Uhura protested, "if this... creature... can make us do anything how will we ever escape?"

"We'll find a way, Lieutenant," Kirk said, with more optimism than he felt.

"It could kill us, Captain," Uhura said quietly. "It could make us beam out into space. It could make us do anything."

"We're no use to Philos dead," Kirk

said. "Mr Spock believes that at this distance the control Philos has over us may be limited. He may not be able to force us into actions, but only change those we're actually involved in. So if we just sit tight we should be safe enough."

"But for how long?" Uhura wondered. "We can't just hibernate in space forever."

Kirk stood up and walked round the table. "Philos wants to frighten us," he said. "He wants whatever emotions he can force out of us. But we're one step ahead of him. We know what he's trying to do, and that's our strength. We don't scare easily. The Enterprise can stay in orbit for months if necessary. Philos will get bored with us, and let us go."

The briefing room emptied slowly. McCoy lingered until only Kirk and Spock were left.

"Is that what you're going to broadcast to the crew, Jim?"

"Yes," Kirk said. "Or something like it."

"They might believe it," McCoy nodded, "but do you?"

Kirk sat down heavily. "No." He rubbed his hands over his face. "There are over four hundred crew on this ship. How can I protect them all? Perhaps Philos can sense our feelings now, perhaps he's enjoying them, but soon he'll want something stronger. We're trapped. And we can't even put out a distress call or whoever comes to help us will be trapped as well."

"Philos sure has all his options covered," McCoy said.

Kirk nodded. His fingers drummed the table top, frustrated. He turned to his

Science Officer.

"Mr Spock, your mental powers are far stronger than ours. Can you break this hold that Philos has on us? Can you fight him?"

"I do not know, Captain," Spock said honestly. "Philos has powers that far exceed my own. They are part of his mode of existence, mine are merely supplementary. We did not escape from Cerus Alpha by winning a fight with Philos. We took him unawares. We surprised him."

"That shows he's vulnerable," Kirk said. "He's got a weak spot. Can't we exploit it?"

"Everyone has a weak spot," Spock said softly, and Kirk, sensing a deeper implication in his Science Officer's words, looked at him in quick surprise.

"Even you?" McCoy glanced at Spock with a half smile, attempting to lighten the mood.

"Why should I be exempt, Doctor?" Spock asked impassively.

"Can you feel any contact with Philos now, Spock?" Kirk wondered.

"No, Captain, and in any event it I do not think it would be sensible to initiate a confrontation. I believe Philos will contact us again before very long."

"So... we wait?" Kirk said.

"It would seem so," Spock agreed calmly.

It was like living in a mine field. The Enterprise circled Cerus Alpha in stately orbit, serene against the darkness

of space, all systems on automatic. The crew tried to keep themselves occupied doing work that did not involve the use of any life support or combat equipment.

It was boring. And frustrating. Kirk's temper was shortening. The crew worked on private research papers, exercised in the gymnasium, or tried to relax in the Rest and Recreation rooms. Unfortunately, since these facilities had been designed with the intention that only a small number of off-duty crew members would use them at any one time, they were frequently over crowded. Good natured ribbing gave way to irritated comments and then began to turn into arguments that too often threatened to erupt into fights.

Kirk was well aware of what was going on. He sat opposite Spock trying to get interested in the three-dimensional chess board but his mind refused to concentrate on the moves. It churned over ways of defeating Philos, none of them practical. Many of the crew had also made suggestions. None of them were practical either.

"Check mate," Spock observed politely.

"Again?" Kirk said irritably.

"It was inevitable from the moment you moved your knight, Captain."

"That far back, eh?"

Spock nodded. "Will you play again, Captain?"

Kirk ran his finger round the collar of his uniform. "I suppose so," he said, a trifle ungraciously. "What else is there to do?"

Spock's eyebrow rose slightly, but he said nothing.

"Spock," Kirk seemed to be growing more and more uncomfortable, "I know you like it hot, but it's getting impossible in here."

"Indeed, Captain?" Spock stood up. Out of consideration to his Human companions he usually kept his cabin temperature at a level that was, to him, slightly chilly. He currently felt pleasantly warm although Kirk was sweating. He opened the cabin door. "It is not only my cabin, Captain," he observed. "The ship's temperature is rising."

The internal communicator beeped suddenly.

"Mr Spock?" It was the Chief Engineer's voice. "Is the Captain still with you?"

"What's happening, Mr Scott?" Kirk was across the room in a couple of strides. "We're roasting up here."

"Aye, and we're roasting down here too, sir," Scott confirmed. "Someone's sabotaged the heating panel. No-one can remember doing it but it was probably Robson. The poor lad's practically suggested I throw him in the brig. I told him to forget it. It wasn't his fault. It could have been any of us."

"Can you handle it, Scotty?"

"Aye, sir." There was a pause. "If I'm allowed to, you understand?"

"Work on it," Kirk said, "and Scotty, if you want to get angry or frightened don't try and control it. If Philos wants emotions, we'll give them to him. We'll entertain him. For now."

"I understand, Captain. I've got one or two budding actors down here. I'll try and encourage them to emote. They'll be glad of something to do."

With Spock close behind him Kirk headed for the Bridge. The turbolift felt like an oven.

"What do you think, Mr Spock? Philos got bored?"

"It would appear so, Captain."

"It seems that I was wrong when I predicted that if he got bored he might let us go."

"That should not surprise you, Captain," Spock said mildly, "since you did not believe it anyway. It would appear that I may also have been wrong. It is possible that Philos *can* control the crew."

"That would alter our situation quite considerably," Kirk said grimly.

They stepped onto the Bridge. Sulu was in the command chair. He stood up as Kirk approached. Sweat was beading his face.

"Welcome to Vulcan, sir," he said to Kirk.

"The air on Vulcan has a low humidity count, Mr Sulu," Spock observed academically, "and therefore bears little resemblance to our current conditions."

"It was a joke, sir," Sulu said.

Spock said gravely, "I was aware of that, Mr Sulu."

Kirk sat down. Spock stood behind him.

"Captain," he said quietly, "I am becoming conscious of an increasing mental pressure which I believe may emanate from Cerus Alpha."

Kirk turned to him eagerly. "You can communicate with Philos, Mr Spock."

"No, Captain, not in the sense of conducting a conversation. I do not believe Philos wants to converse with us, but perhaps if I could return to my cabin I could increase my knowledge of his intentions. There are certain Vulcan techniques that I could try."

"Would it be dangerous for you, Mr Spock?"

"No, Captain," Spock said. "I have performed the techniques many times before."

"But not with an alien entity probing your mind," Kirk objected.

"I assure you, Captain, there is no danger. We have a limited number of options open to us. I believe this is one we must explore."

Kirk was forced to recognise the truth in that. "Just take care," he said. "That's an order. And call me as soon as you find out anything we can use."

It was over half an hour before Kirk's intercom bleeped. During that time the temperature had stabilised into an uncomfortable tropical humidity which kept the Bridge crew fidgeting and pulling at the collars of their uniforms. A brief message from Chief Engineer Scott predicted hopefully that things would return to normal within the hour.

"Captain." Spock's voice betrayed no feeling. "I have made some progress. If you could come to my cabin I would like to discuss it with you."

Kirk met Doctor McCoy in the corridor.

"Jim, where's Spock? The heat's playing havoc with my cardio-scan. Spock programmed it for me and he's the only one who really understands the thing. I'd like him to have a look at it."

"I think Spock may be finding us a way out of our troubles," Kirk said. "Care to come and hear it?"

"That's the best suggestion I've had in years," McCoy grinned. "Lead the way."

The Vulcan First Officer's cabin smelled sweetly of incense. The lights were dimmed. It was still intolerably hot.

"I have discovered certain items of interest by a process similar to the mind meld," Spock explained when Kirk and McCoy sat down, "and I believe I have done so without Philos being aware of my probe, although I cannot be certain of that. I know that Philos has less control over us here than he did on the planet's surface, and the sensations he receives from the emotions of the crew are correspondingly dulled."

"But less control still means that he can hold us here?" Kirk asked. "Or destroy us?"

"Affirmative, Captain, but it also suggests the possibility that he could be distracted by the offer of a stronger stimulus."

"How could we provide that?" Kirk wondered.

"By beaming someone down to the planet's surface," Spock said.

"Are you crazy?" Kirk stared at his Science Officer incredulously. "You know what would happen to anyone we sent down there."

"The same thing that will happen up here, Captain," Spock observed mildly, "if we do not take action to prevent it."

"It's out of the question," Kirk said. "I'm surprised at you even suggesting it, Mr Spock."

"It is possible that it might save the Enterprise, Captain."

"Possible," Kirk agreed, "but not certain. It's just a theory."

"True, Captain." Spock stared over Kirk's head. "But it is certain that if we do nothing the Enterprise will be destroyed."

"We'll do something," Kirk promised, "but it won't involve sending down a sacrificial lamb to Philos. There's got to be another way."

"Would it make it easier for you, Captain, if you had a volunteer?"

"No it wouldn't," Kirk said shortly. "No-one's going down to Cerus Alpha, and that's final."

"Anyway," McCoy said, "who'd be fool enough to volunteer?"

Spock stared at him gravely. "Obviously I am the logical choice. My mind is better adapted to..."

Kirk slammed his hand down on the table so unexpectedly that McCoy jumped. "No! No volunteers. That's my final word, Commander Spock."

"Captain," Spock sounded vaguely uncomfortable, "I have a personal reason for suggesting that I take on this responsibility."

"Really?" The heat and the heady smell of incense were getting to Kirk. That and the fact that he was

disappointed. He had expected Spock to come up with a viable suggestion for defeating Philos. He stood up and headed for the door. "Whatever it is, it makes no difference. No-one will beam down to Cerus Alpha, volunteer or not. If you can come up with a more sensible suggestion, Mr Spock, I'll be on the Bridge. In the meantime I think Doctor McCoy needs your help."

"And that," McCoy said as the door slid shut behind Kirk, "as they say, is that."

"The Captain is allowing his emotions to overrule his common sense."

"I think he just doesn't want to hand out a death sentence," McCoy said. "To you or anyone else."

"It is better to risk one man than four hundred and thirty."

"I think Jim would argue that it is better not to risk anyone at all."

"I would find that argument more appealing if there were other alternatives available to us." Spock turned away from McCoy. He seemed to be contemplating the hypnotic dance of the red eternal flame. "I feel responsible for our predicament. For that reason, if no other, I should be allowed to try and rectify the situation."

"You feel responsible?" McCoy was incredulous. "You saved our lives, Spock. You got us off Cerus Alpha. You didn't send us down there, it was a command decision."

"I had misgivings," Spock said. His voice was curiously flat. "I did not voice them. I should have done so."

"We all had misgivings," McCoy said, "especially after hearing that scream."

What makes yours so special that you've got to die because of them?"

"I am the Captain's Science Officer," Spock said, in the same grey tone. "It is my duty to inform him of anything I believe will assist him, however inconsequential it may appear at the time. I should not have allowed the fact that I am a Vulcan to divert me from my responsibilities."

"You're talking in riddles, Spock," McCoy said.

"I do not expect you to understand, Doctor."

"Too right I don't understand," McCoy agreed. "All this Vulcan stuff you come up with at times leaves me cold. But I *do* understand that Jim's given you an order, and you've got to obey it. You stay on the Enterprise, where you're needed. No more trips to Cerus Alpha for you."

"There are times," Spock said with more than a hint of irritation, "when I find serving with Humans exceedingly frustrating."

"Has it occurred to you, Mr Spock," McCoy asked with exaggerated politeness, "that there might be times when we find serving with a Vulcan affects us exactly the same way?"

He stood up. Had Spock been Human he would have a friendly hand on the Science Officer's shoulder. Instead he simply gestured to the door. "My cardio-scan's developed a mind of its own, Spock. Would you care to come and talk to it in Vulcan? I'm sure it'll behave properly in future if you do."

Kirk's intercom bleeped. He answered it, expecting to hear Spock's

voice. Instead he heard Chief Engineer Scott.

"Captain, can you come to the Transporter Room at once?"

"Certainly, Mr Scott, and thanks for getting our temperature back to normal."

"I think you've got another problem now, sir," Scott predicted. "I've already called Doctor McCoy."

The urgency in Scott's voice sent Kirk running to the turbolift. He reached the Transporter Room expecting to see bodies on the floor or worse. Instead he found Scott, McCoy and a young engineering ensign all looking slightly bemused.

"Well?" Kirk looked round. "What's happened? Has someone been injured?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Scott looked acutely uncomfortable, "I found the laddie flat on his back, but there's no permanent damage."

The young ensign was rubbing his neck. He looked more surprised than hurt.

"Take him to Sickbay, Bones," Kirk ordered. "Check him out."

"That won't be necessary, Jim," McCoy said.

"How do you know without a check-up?" Kirk demanded. "Crewmen don't collapse for nothing."

"They do if Spock uses his sneaky nerve pinch on them," McCoy said.

"Spock?" Kirk repeated. He looked round again. "Where is Spock?"

"That's the problem," Scott said. "He

put the duty ensign to sleep and beamed down to Cerus Alpha."

"He... did... what?" Kirk could hardly get the words out.

"Beamed down, Jim," McCoy confirmed. "That damn fool Vulcan has just committed suicide."

CHAPTER FOUR

"I don't believe it," Kirk was pacing up and down in frustration. McCoy watched him, felt for him. "I just don't believe it. I gave him an order, a direct order. Spock just doesn't disobey orders. He's my First Officer. He's a Vulcan. Damn it all, Bones, he's my friend!"

"Being a Vulcan had something to do with it, Jim," McCoy said.

"You keep telling me that," Kirk rounded on the Doctor, "but you can't explain why."

"I don't know why," McCoy said.

Kirk began pacing again. McCoy pointed to a chair. "Sit down, Jim, you're wearing out my carpet."

But Kirk kept pacing, his hands clenched.

"He said he felt responsible for our predicament," McCoy had been through this before. Several times. "I told him it was nonsense. It went in one pointed ear and straight out the other."

"He's down there, Bones," Kirk said quietly. The pain in his voice hurt McCoy. "What's happening to him?" Suddenly anger took over. "And it's not doing any good! We're still here. What was the point of it? It's a waste of a life, a

terrible waste."

"He's only been gone a short time," McCoy said.

"Down there it could seem like years," Kirk said dully. Suddenly he stopped and turned, his face bright with passion. "Bones, we got away from Philos before, the three of us. We got away because we worked together, we gained strength from each other. It proves Philos isn't invincible. Maybe we could do it again." He leaned on the table. McCoy stared up at him. "We could try, Bones!"

McCoy managed a smile. "You want us to commit suicide too?"

"We're waiting for death up here, Bones."

"Unless Spock manages to pull something out of the hat."

"He won't manage it on his own."

"He's a Vulcan, Jim. He's got certain mental advantages."

"He's half Human," Kirk said. "We always forget that. And he admitted Philos was strong. In a straight battle Spock will lose. He'll put up a good fight, but he'll lose. But with us helping him there may be a chance.""

"If I was convinced we could help..." McCoy began.

"We've got to do something," Kirk interrupted. "I've got to do something."

"Don't you think your job is to stay on the Bridge?" McCoy asked.

"What for?" Kirk demanded. "There's no Enterprise to command any more. We're a dead ship. We're hanging in space waiting for an alien mind to feed

off us. Use us. Kill us. My job is to try and stop that happening. Perhaps Spock has done the right thing, whatever his reasons. Perhaps the only way to fight Philos is down on the planet's surface. We don't seem to be making much progress up here."

"Jim," McCoy said, "has it occurred to you that you're trying to persuade yourself your duty is to go down and help Spock?"

"Maybe," Kirk admitted. He turned away from McCoy. "It's also occurred to me that I'm trying to persuade you into a course of action that might be against the best interests of the crew. You're needed up here, Bones. It's selfish of me to pretend otherwise." He stood still for a moment and drew a deep breath. "I shall hand over temporary command to Chief Engineer Scott. I know you'll support him with the same kind of loyalty that you've given me..."

"Cut the speeches, Jim," McCoy interrupted dryly. "You also know I wouldn't let you beam down to Cerus Alpha without me. There's one fool down there already. We may as well make it three."

The landscape was desolate and bathed in a dust that looked like powdered blood. A range of dark mountains towered on the horizon. The sky took its colour from the ground, harsh and red. Kirk and McCoy were already finding it difficult to breath the hot thin air.

"It's like Vulcan, Jim," McCoy said. "Like one of those deserts where they send the Vulcan children to prove their courage."

"Spock must be around here

somewhere," Kirk said. "Philos has taken the landscape from Spock's memory."

They moved forward cautiously.

"What else has he taken from Spock's mind?" McCoy wondered apprehensively. "There were some pretty vicious creatures in those Vulcan deserts, if I remember rightly."

"We've got phasers," Kirk said.

"We appear to have phasers," McCoy said.

Kirk fired at a nearby rock. The rock disappeared in a glow of light.

"Mine works," he said.

"It appears to work," McCoy corrected.

"Bones," Kirk pushed the phaser back on his belt, "I'm beginning to wish I'd left you behind."

They heard footsteps approaching with unhurried steadiness. A tall figure stepped out from behind a rock. He wore formal black, his tunic decorated by a single line of alien script woven in gold, but he carried a regulation Starfleet phaser.

"Spock!" Kirk exclaimed, joyfully. He moved forward. "Spock, you're safe."

Spock stared at him expressionlessly. He lifted the phaser.

"Jim..." McCoy warned.

Kirk's razor sharp reactions saved him. He threw himself sideways and rolled. The phaser beam missed him and dissolved a rock.

"Spock," Kirk scrambled to his feet,

"what the devil are you doing? Don't you recognise me? Spock?"

"You appear to be my superior officer," Spock said levelly.

"Dammit, Spock," McCoy said, "he is your superior officer."

"That is illogical," Spock said gravely. "Captain Kirk is on the Enterprise." He gazed at McCoy. "As is Doctor McCoy."

"Captain Kirk is right here," Kirk said. "We're both here, Spock."

"Illogical," Spock repeated in a flat, dead voice. "You are illusions. You are unreal." The phaser was pointing directly at Kirk, and Kirk knew that this time he would not be able to dodge the beam.

"Interesting," Spock said. "Even in these illusory circumstances I find it impossible to imagine killing you. If I fire again you will undoubtedly evade me in some way." He lowered the phaser. "Very well, remain there, but I shall not respond to you in any way. You are illusions. You cannot provoke me into an emotional response."

"Could we ever?" McCoy asked acidly.

"Spock," Kirk insisted, "we came down to find you."

"Illogical," Spock said. "Captain Kirk would not behave in such an irrational manner. Captain Kirk would not leave the Enterprise." But there was a slight tinge of doubt in his voice.

"Jim would come and rescue you from this damn fool suicide mission, Spock," McCoy said hotly. "And you know it."

"I might even come just to drag you back to face disciplinary action," Kirk added. "You disobeyed my orders, Commander Spock. I could have you reduced in rank. If I pushed a charge of mutiny I could have you court martialled."

Spock stared at him for a long minute. "You are an illusion," he said softly. "I exist. You do not exist. Captain Kirk and Doctor McCoy are on the Enterprise. You are destroying my concentration. There must be a way to remove you."

A sudden movement behind one of the rocks turned Kirk's head. A scraping of claws, a muffled snarl. Something climbed over the rock, something almost like a man. It had small red eyes that glared balefully. It was almost eight feet tall. Its body was scaled. Its muscles rippled.

Spock watched it dispassionately. "Fascinating," he said.

"Jim," McCoy said, backing, "is that thing an illusion?"

"I hope so," Kirk said, backing with him.

The creature smelled sourly of stale blood. It snarled again. Kirk shifted his phaser to full power and fired.

Nothing happened.

McCoy fired with equal lack of effect. The creature balled its hands, thumped its chest and let out a scream of rage.

"We've annoyed it," Kirk said.

"We sure have," McCoy agreed with feeling.

"It's an illusion, Bones." But Kirk saw the red eyes glaring at him and was not comforted by his own comment.

"Illusions can hurt," McCoy reminded him. "Remember what Spock told us about the Vulcan cactus plant? We can register pain, even if the way we're receiving it is illusory."

The creature began lumber forward. Spock still watched. He held his phaser but it was pointing at the ground.

"Spock," Kirk requested, "do something. Anything."

Spock ignored him. The creature speeded its pace. Kirk fumbled for his communicator. He managed to flip it open but before he could use it the creature suddenly bounded forward. Taken by surprise Kirk turned and ran. McCoy was close behind him.

The ground was uneven and Kirk stumbled. He righted himself, heard a rasping growl behind him, and staggered on. But he could not regain his balance. His foot hit a rock and he sprawled on his face. The communicator flew from his hand. McCoy sprinted blindly past him.

Turning on his back Kirk saw the creature stop. The semi-human face twisted into an expression that could have been triumph. It shambled forward, grunting. On the horizon Spock stood immobile, a stark black shape.

McCoy realised that Kirk was no longer running with him. He skidded to a halt and turned, saw Kirk on the ground and ran back to him. Kirk felt himself being pulled to his feet.

"I've twisted my ankle," he said. "Leave me. Save yourself."

The creature lurched forward a few

more paces then stopped and indulged in another display of aggressive chest beating.

"Charming fellow, isn't he?" McCoy said, trying to get Kirk onto his feet.

"Bones, I'm giving you an order. Get the hell out of here."

"Can't hear you," McCoy puffed, hoisting Kirk up. "Jim, I recommend a diet. You weigh a ton."

"Run, you pig-headed medic! Run while you can."

"If we're both going to get eaten we may as well make it a social affair," McCoy said. The creature was still watching them, shuffling and snarling but showing no further inclination to attack.

"How far d'you think we're going to get, Bones?" Kirk's voice was tight with pain.

"If we go slowly," McCoy said hopefully, "maybe we can just..." he moved back supporting Kirk "...quietly... sneak... away."

But the movements seemed to have roused the creature. It roared and then came forward in a sudden terrible rush. McCoy tried to push himself in front of Kirk. Kirk's weight fell on his bad ankle and he collapsed on the ground. McCoy stood over him, futilely balling his fists as if he was intending the take their massive attacker on in a straight fight. He saw Spock standing like a statue, watching them.

"Dammit, Spock," he said through his teeth, "do something!"

The creature disappeared. A brief wavering of image and it was gone.

McCoy breathed a very audible sigh of relief. He opened his medical kit, gave Kirk a quick shot of pain killer and scanned his swelling ankle. Spock walked slowly towards them.

McCoy glared up at him. "What took you so long?"

"Fascinating," Spock said. "Although I know that you are unreal I still cannot allow you to die."

"Spock," McCoy said exasperated, "how can we get it into your thick Vulcan skull that we're as real as you are?"

"Skulls," Kirk said suddenly. "Mind meld. Can you meld with an illusion, Spock?"

"Such an attempt would simply reflect my own thoughts," Spock said.

"Then do it," Kirk insisted. "Use the meld, enter my mind. Convince yourself."

Spock hesitated.

"What've you got to loose?" Kirk challenged. "It'll give you the proof you need, one way or the other."

Spock reached out his hand. His long fingers touched Kirk's face. His voice was hypnotic. "My mind to your mind... my thoughts with your thoughts... we are one... our minds are one."

There was a long pause. Spock took his hand away.

"Satisfied?" Kirk asked.

"Captain," Spock said. "This is... terrible."

"We knew you'd be pleased to see us," McCoy said.

"How could you do this, Captain?"

"We came to get you back," Kirk said. He was slightly dismayed at the expression on Spock's face. The Vulcan was clearly disturbed. "The three of us," he added encouragingly. "Combined strength. We did it before."

"The situation was totally different before," Spock said. "We took Philos by surprise. We cannot do that again. He knows you are here. He allowed you to beam down. He will not allow you to beam up again."

"We won't need his permission," Kirk said grimly.

"Captain, you have allowed your emotions to place you in an impossible position. You and Doctor McCoy are now trapped on this planet."

"So are you," McCoy interrupted.

"I did not have any false expectations of returning when I chose to beam down," Spock said. "My hope was that I would distract Philos long enough to weaken his hold on the Enterprise. That is now unlikely to happen."

"But there are three of us..." Kirk began.

Spock turned to him and his voice held the barest trace of irritation. "You keep saying that, Captain, but in fact your presence here has grossly weakened my chances of success."

Kirk stared at him. Spock's voice softened. "Jim, don't you understand? Alone I had only myself to consider. Now Philos can use each of us against the other. When I see you, how will I know which is an illusion and which is real?"

"The mind meld?" Kirk said.

"I doubt if I will be allowed to use that again."

"Do you think Philos allowed it this time?"

Spock nodded. "I am certain of it. He needs my doubt. He feeds on doubt, and on confusion. The confused mind is more easily manipulated. Emotions flood it. That is what Philos wants."

There was a long silence.

"Can't you just ignore us?" Kirk suggested hopefully.

"A full Vulcan might," Spock said, "but I am half Human." He turned away. "Even when I believed you were illusions I could not imagine myself killing you, nor could I conjure a monster to do it for me."

"That was your monster?" McCoy asked. "I'm impressed."

"Making monsters is easy," Spock said. "Refusing to believe in them can be difficult."

"I don't see why," Kirk objected.

"Your monsters will be more believable than mine, Captain. They will come from within your own mind."

"Yours was good enough," Kirk said. "But Spock, we know all this is illusion; surely that gives us an advantage? Surely it gives us strength?"

"Our strength is the knowledge that Philos does not wish to destroy us," Spock said. "He needs us. He needs our emotional reactions. If we die it will be because we have brought death on ourselves."

"Well, that's better," McCoy said

cheerfully. "I've no intention of thinking myself dead."

"Doctor," Spock said, "please do not underestimate the strength of the illusions Philos can produce. Once you are in their grip they will be reality for you, and whether Philos intends it or not they will be quite capable of producing an emotional response that can bring about death."

"In simple language," Kirk translated, "you're saying we can die of fear."

"Affirmative," Spock agreed.

"Even you?" McCoy asked.

"I have a slight advantage over you," Spock admitted, "but although I can usually still recognise that I am functioning in an illusory world, it is becoming increasingly difficult for me to retain mental control. And I must retain it if I am to find a way of freeing the Enterprise."

"Can't you give us any hints on how to cope?" McCoy asked. "If we see some kind of monster rushing towards us, what do we do? What do we think?"

"I very much doubt that you will see anything resembling traditional monster, Doctor," Spock said. "Your monsters will be from the depths of your mind. Maybe only small things, things you have buried or forgotten. My only advice is that you try to have positive thoughts. Doubts and self recrimination will weaken your mental state and give Philos greater control over you."

"Thanks," McCoy said. "That's very helpful."

"We broke free before," Kirk insisted. "We'll do it again. Come on,

Spock, stop being so negative. It's not like you. Haven't you any ideas? Theories? Anything? It doesn't matter how silly they sound."

"There is a hypothesis that I have been considering, Captain," Spock admitted. "If proven it could give us a weapon of some strength. But it is as yet untested."

"Never mind that," Kirk said. "Tell us. We need all the help we can get."

"And in simple language," McCoy added.

"It is still only a theory," Spock cautioned.

"We know," Kirk said. "But let's hear it anyway."

Kirk disappeared.

McCoy disappeared.

Spock was alone.

Spock was unsurprised to find himself suddenly isolated. Rapid changes of scenery had become increasingly common as Philos sought to penetrate his mind and weaken his iron self control. It had been a battle of wills, with Spock still marginally on the winning side. A battle that he had hoped would keep Philos distracted long enough for the Enterprise to escape.

It was also a battle that he knew he could not win. Even a full Vulcan would have succumbed to the relentless mental pressure in the end. Spock had simply hoped that when the time came he could utilise certain techniques he had been practising over the years and free his katra from his body forever.

If he was unsuccessful he knew his death would be prolonged and probably undignified, his logic shattered, his control lost, his mind twisted into insanity. And all this, he reflected, to provide a few moments of vicarious stimulation for an alien lifeform itself a helpless prisoner of its own desperate needs.

He could accept his own position. He had never feared death. His Vulcan heritage had at least given him that, and if he had to die it was obviously logical to try and make the inevitable fact serve a useful purpose. The knowledge that he had been instrumental in saving the Enterprise and her crew would have given him that satisfaction.

But the arrival of Kirk and McCoy had altered everything. His Human half understood their actions. Deep inside it warned him strangely to know that they had risked so much to try to help him, but his Vulcan nature found it hard to suppress an extreme irritation, almost an anger, at the thoughtless emotionalism of their actions. They had robbed him of the chance to give them the ultimate gift, the gift he felt he owed them, the gift of life.

They would have always remembered him for it. He would have liked that to be remembered. In the future, when the Enterprise finally docked after her five year mission, later when Jim Kirk and Leonard McCoy were sent out again by Starfleet on new adventures, and in the even more distant future when age and time retired them to a life of gentle memories, they would remember...

He stiffened suddenly. He should not have thought about his friends. His moment of weakness had opened a gate and the entity that called itself Philos was already crawling inside.

His mind twisted and fought as the entity searched. It enjoyed this creature. Most beings had basic fears that burst suddenly into a flood of emotion so overwhelming they would have destroyed themselves very quickly if the entity had not given them brief respite before using them again. This creature was different. Its emotions were more subtle. It felt an exquisite shame when forced to accept them, a strange mental horror that the entity found deliciously exciting.

And there was danger too. The entity knew it. This creature could use its mind in ways the entity had never experienced before. But even that was stimulating. The entity would not release the creature. Never. It could not. It probed and searched and found the fears that Spock kept hidden and denied. Found them and prepared to use them.

To enjoy them.

To feast.

Captain James Kirk sat in a large bare and windowless room and felt a sense of foreboding that was all the more terrifying because he did not understand it.

He was a captive, that much he knew, and he was alone. He commanded a ship, a Starship, and she was called the Enterprise. She had a crew of four hundred and thirty-three men and women and he was responsible for the safety of each one of them.

He tried to imagine their faces, but it was difficult. He knew he had a First Officer, his second in command, a tall man with glossy black hair and something different about him that Kirk could not for the moment define. A

Navigator and a Helmsman, both young, full of life and vigour. A Communications Officer, efficient and beautiful, a female Communications Officer who was fourth in the line of command. And a Ship's Doctor. He could almost see the Ship's Doctor, but his memory clouded suddenly. An Engineer who loved the Enterprise almost as much as Kirk did, whose Scots accent grew stronger whenever he was excited... or afraid. Was he ever afraid? Kirk knew that he was, and like all of them his courage extended to admitting it.

There were others. Technical staff, medical assistants, various specialists he could call upon for research and advice, Security men. So many others, all dependent on him, on his decisions. In an emergency his order could mean the literal difference between life and death. The Enterprise in space was an independent world. How often did he have the agony of acting like its god?

"Too often," a voice said pleasantly.

Kirk twisted in his chair. There was a sound of laughter.

"You can't see me, Captain Kirk. Perhaps it's just as well. You wouldn't like me. I don't conform to your aesthetic standards. I would revolt you."

"I'm not prejudiced by appearances," Kirk said.

"The classic textbook answer, Captain Kirk. What a pity it isn't true." The voice rapped out an order suddenly. "Look behind you! Now!"

The unexpectedness of it twisted Kirk round. A creature stood behind him, close enough to touch. A massive sac of a body hanging between eight bent legs. A body covered with what looked like oily fur. Kirk could smell it, thick and dirty. It

moved, but Kirk moved faster. He jumped from his chair and backed away.

The disembodied voice laughed delightedly. "Brave Captain Kirk! Brave god of the Enterprise! How well you know yourself!"

Kirk had mastered his feelings almost immediately. His dislike of spiders was something he thought he had conquered. He could even pick small ones up without flinching, although he still tried to avoid handling anything large.

"Most people have a phobia of some kind," he said evenly. "It only becomes a problem when you let it control you."

He moved forward and reached out his hand. He touched the alien body and felt the harshness of the hairs on its bent legs. The creature disappeared.

The voice said, "You are a flawed god, Captain Kirk."

"I'm not a god," Kirk said.

"But you act like one. You send your crew down to hostile planets, knowing that they could be killed. And they are killed, aren't they? They die because of your decisions."

"Death in the execution of one's duty is an accepted hazard of Starfleet service," Kirk quoted.

"Whoever writes those textbooks, Captain Kirk? Someone who has never been a crew member on a Starship. A little bureaucrat sitting in an office, with a pretty uniform and a rank higher than yours. Someone who boldly goes from one official meeting to another. An accepted hazard? Do *you* accept it? Would you deliberately send that pretty Communications Officer of yours to be raped and killed in order to fulfil a

Starfleet directive?"

"That would never be necessary," Kirk said tightly.

"How do you know?" the voice reasoned. "Maybe it hasn't been necessary yet, but what if the beautiful Lieutenant Uhura's life could buy the safety of the entire Enterprise crew? What then? Would you let them all die?"

"I'd find an alternative," Kirk said. His hands ached. He realised he was clenching them, nails biting into his palms. "There are always alternatives."

"You sound like that logical Science Officer of yours. You like to think you understand him, don't you? You like to think he's your friend. But what do you really know about him? He's an alien. He's far more Vulcan than Human, for all his mixed parentage. He doesn't even want to be Human. He'd certainly sacrifice the beautiful Lieutenant. He wouldn't lose a wink of sleep over it. His only problem in an emergency would be deciding which crew members were the most expendable."

"Untrue," Kirk said. "Spock respects life. All Vulcans do."

"So you believe," the voice mocked. "But do you know? You haven't seen him make that decision, have you? How well do you know your crew, Captain Kirk? How well do you know the men you like to call your friends? How well do you know yourself? How fit are you to be a Starship Captain?"

Suddenly Uhura was standing in front of Kirk, a baffled look in her eyes. Christine Chapel appeared next to her, looking equally amazed.

"Captain?" Uhura stepped forward. "It is you, isn't it." She reached out a hand

as if expecting her fingers to pass through him. He felt her warm touch. "What's happening?"

"I don't know," Kirk said. "I don't remember how I got here. Fill me in."

"You were on the Bridge," Uhura said. "And then you disappeared."

"Were we in orbit?"

"Yes, round an unmapped planet, class M."

She shifted her gaze from Kirk's face to his hands. Kirk realised he was holding a phaser.

Then Uhura stared behind him. "Captain... look!"

Kirk turned. The Enterprise floated serenely in space, a three dimensional image on a holographic screen. Kirk felt a spasm of something like pain. His ship, his crew, his responsibility.

"Is Mr Spock in command?" he asked Uhura.

"Yes, sir."

That at least was comforting.

"Captain," Uhura said. She and Christine Chapel were standing close together as if their closeness gave them comfort. "Why are you aiming that phaser at us?"

Kirk looked at his hand as if it did not belong to him. Looked at the phaser as if it did not belong to him. It was set on kill.

"Decisions, Captain Kirk," the pleasant disembodied voice said, close to his ear. "There's your ship, your little world, complete with crew. Over four

hundred of them. Here are two young women. Which is it to be?"

"I don't understand you," Kirk said harshly.

"You understand me perfectly, Captain Kirk, you're just playing for time. The Enterprise or Lieutenant Uhura? The Enterprise or Nurse Chapel? It's a simple decision... for a god. Mind you, you've got to live with it. With the memory. Forever."

"You can't touch the Enterprise," Kirk said.

Laughter bounced round the room. "Touching the Enterprise is easy, Captain Kirk. Watch."

On the screen the Enterprise shuddered. An unseen force shook it. Kirk stared at the image, but his phaser did not alter its aim.

"Do you want sound as well, Captain? Listen."

Staccato voices filled the room. Kirk recognised Spock's calm orders, Scott's reports from the Engine Room, but the familiar sounds did not reassure him. He felt instead a stab of frustration. Why was he down on safe ground while his crew were threatened?

"They're not frightened yet," the voice observed, "but they will be, quite soon. All of them. Your crew, Captain Kirk. Your responsibility."

"Stop playing games," Kirk said. "Tell me what you want."

"Provide you with alternatives, you mean?" the voice mocked. "You only have two: save the Enterprise, or save the women. Two against four hundred? Two against your ship? Why are you

hesitating?"

Uhura and Chapel were staring at him now, wide eyed.

"I intend to save both," Kirk said.

"How noble of you, Kirk. I'm fascinated to see how you do it. Watch."

Something happened to the Enterprise. It seemed to be changing shape. It rocked, out of control. Sound filled the room. Voices from all the decks, from crew members Kirk had never seen. And from the Bridge, voices he recognised.

"Now they're worried, Captain Kirk. Soon they'll be terrified. You can stop it. It's easy. Make a decision."

The Enterprise began to crumple. It looked as if a huge hand had grasped it and was slowly tightening its fingers. The Enterprise bulged and twisted. Kirk could not imagine what it was like inside.

Noise assaulted him. Screams and panic from the decks. And above it, more painful than Kirk could bear, Spock's voice, still calm, trying to maintain order; Doctor McCoy's voice calling hopelessly for medical supplies; Mr Scott trying to make sense of what was happening in the Engine Room.

"Soon it'll be too late, Captain! One last chance. Two women against four hundred. Not a difficult decision for a god!"

Kirk lifted the phaser. Uhura and Chapel shrank back against the wall, huddling together.

Kirk said, "I'm sorry. Please understand."

And fired.

He had to keep his eyes open. He had to make it quick. But it was long enough to imprint the scene for ever on his memory.

"No choice," he said dully to the empty space where Uhura and Chapel had been a moment before, vibrant and living. "No choice."

Suddenly, horribly, the Enterprise crumpled into a tighter shape. Her seams opened, her engines shattered. Accompanied by the frenzied sounds of her dying crew the Enterprise collapsed and fragmented, breaking up in a slow macabre dance.

Kirk watched the debris floating. Each slow moving piece seemed to him to represent a life, a life he should have found a way to save. His mind had ceased to function. He stared numbly, the phaser loose in his hand.

The disembodied voice mocked him, maliciously. "You hesitated, Captain Kirk. Hesitation is fatal. You are flawed, Captain Kirk. Flawed and unfit for command."

Kirk threw the phaser viciously at the blank holoscreen. He could still hear the hopeless screams of his crew. They battered his mind and stayed with him until he mercifully blacked out.

Doctor McCoy was standing in the Transporter Room talking to Chief Engineer Scott when Kirk and Spock came through the door. "Do you have the coordinates, Mr Scott?" Kirk asked.

Scott nodded. "Aye, sir." But he looked worried.

"Good," Kirk said. "Are you ready, Bones?"

"I'm ready, Jim." McCoy realised that he had a full issue of medical equipment with him.

"Captain," Scott said, "we have a problem."

"Problem?" Kirk rounded on him. "What problem? We can't afford any problems. We have an emergency down there."

"The transporter, sir; it's malfunctioning."

Kirk's expression tightened. "You mean you can't send us down?"

"Not exactly, sir. It's just that I'd like time to run some tests."

"How long, Scotty?"

The Chief Engineer shrugged apologetically. "An hour, sir. At least."

"An hour?" Kirk's voice rose. "Out of the question."

"In an hour every one on the planet's surface will be dead," Spock observed conversationally.

"Half an hour?" Scott bargained. "This is not a minor hiccup, Captain."

"Impossible," Kirk said. "If we wait half an hour we might as well not go at all."

"If you go now I can't guarantee your safety," Scott insisted. "Half an hour will at least allow me time to make another test."

McCoy could hear a note of fear in the normally unflappable Engineer's voice. He looked at the transporter pads and felt the familiar secret panic. He had never liked the transporter. It was against

nature to spin a man's body into a cloud of molecules and hope they'd come together again in the right order and in the right place. Mostly they did, but there had been accidents. The accidents were classified, but McCoy was a doctor, he had access to files non-medical personnel never saw. He knew what could happen. He knew what had happened. Not on the Enterprise, but on other Starfleet ships. He had seen the results of transporter malfunctions, and every time he stepped onto the pads and waited for the first tingling sensation to ripple through his body he remembered those files, those photographs. The horror in the recorded voices of the witnesses.

"We must go down now, Captain."

That was Spock, emotionless as ever. You could have shown him those tangled creatures that had once been human and he would have probably lifted an eyebrow and said "Fascinating". Spock did not seem to fear death. Unfortunately for everyone else who served with him he seemed to expect them to mirror his attitude.

"They need us down there, Scotty. They need us right now."

That was Kirk. Kirk knew fear, but he had it under control. He would do anything to avoid risking his ship and his crew, but frequently risked himself in a burst of emotional humanity that sometimes appalled McCoy.

Kirk was valuable. Leaving aside his value as a man, which McCoy rated higher than virtually anyone else he knew, he was irreplaceable as a Starship Captain. Kirk *was* the Enterprise. The Enterprise functioned so perfectly because Kirk was in command. The Enterprise was feared by its enemies and respected by Starfleet because Kirk was her Captain and the crew were his family.

Kirk and the Enterprise were inseparable.

"Bones?"

McCoy came back to the present. Kirk was standing next to him. "You know what it's like down there. Those settlers are literally on their knees from Rasson's Fever. You've got to get down to them. They've gone through the incubation period. They're dying now. If you don't treat them the fever will wipe them out."

McCoy nodded. He knew the speed of a second stage Rasson's Fever attack, but all he could see was Scott's face. Scott's frightened face. And hear Scott's voice, unable to disguise the fear his knowledge gave him.

"Captain, I won't risk more than two of you at once."

Forman, the Security Officer, stepped forward. "Permission to beam down first, sir."

"Refused," Kirk said. "I'll go first."

"I shall accompany you," Spock added. It was not a request.

Kirk walked towards the transporter pads. "I don't need anyone to hold my hand, Mr Spock."

Spock stepped on the pad next to Kirk. "I had no intention of doing any such thing, Captain," he said politely. "It is not in any case a very practical suggestion."

McCoy knew it was the nearest thing to an affectionate exchange they would ever make in public. Spock did it to him at times, although it was sometimes difficult to distinguish the barbed comments from insults. McCoy realised with a stab of surprise that he

rated the Vulcan almost as high in his estimation as he rated Jim Kirk. It was just that when he was locked in his Vulcan shell Spock infuriated him more often.

He saw Scott's hand on the transport lever. He saw Kirk on the transporter pad, the light glinting on his auburn hair. He realised how young Kirk looked, how vulnerable. He saw Spock with one hand on his tricorder, a familiar stance. Spock looked mildly curious. That too was familiar. If anyone ever wanted to put up a statue of Spock, that would be the pattern: Spock poised to step forward, tricorder ready.

The bodies began to shimmer. They went out of focus. Scott breathed an audible sigh of relief. And then the warning light began to flash. Spock and Kirk came back into view, frozen now, held by the beam. A siren blared. Kirk and Spock began to change. Scott juggled the lever and said "Oh my god...!". The siren hurt McCoy's ears.

The two men in the transporter chamber were being pulled out of shape. Their bodies elongated, twisted. Something happened to their heads.

Scott wrestled with the controls. "They're breaking up!" There was naked panic in his voice now. "They're breaking up, and I can't stop it. I can't help them. They're breaking up!"

McCoy watched, frozen with a terror that matched Scott's. He watched as Kirk's body twisted into an inhuman shape. He saw Kirk's mouth open in a soundless scream. He saw Kirk's body fall apart and come together in a nightmare shape. He saw Spock pulled into impossible contortions, his limbs broken and refashioned as the transporter tried unsuccessfully to reassemble him. He saw red Human blood and bright alien

green, and finally the blood was the only way he could recognise which horror was which on the Transporter Room floor.

Spock was walking through a shifting mist. His feet raised scurries of dust. There was nothing frightening about his surroundings but he felt a keen sense of desolation. It disturbed him. He was used to his own company. He did not fear isolation, Vulcans tended to be solitary by nature. So why did he feel this internal emptiness?

"Because," a voice said pleasantly, directly behind him, "you are part Human, and Humans are emotional. You have inherited this defect."

Spock turned swiftly. A man stood watching him. A tall man, his face obscured by shadows. He wore Starfleet uniform.

"You," Spock said evenly, "are an illusion."

The man moved into step with him. "Banish me, then. Use that fine Vulcan mind you're so proud of. Banish me."

Spock refused to look at him. He tried to discipline his thoughts. It was unexpectedly difficult. He fought, but control eluded him. And the man stayed next to him, matching him stride for stride, hands behind his back, a tricorder slung over his shoulder.

"I'm afraid you're wasting your time," the pleasant voice observed. "You can't get rid of me. Don't you know why?"

Spock kept walking. A suspicion was forming in his mind. He rejected it.

"You do know, Spock," his

companion observed. "Look at me."

Despite himself Spock stood still.

"Look at me," the other man commanded. "Prove it to yourself. Prove what you already know."

Spock turned. He saw what he expected to see: himself. It was like gazing into a mirror except that his double was smiling. As Spock watched the double's straight eyebrows curved into a Human shape, his pointed ears rounded, his hair lost its sheen and loosened into a more casual style. His demeanour changed. He relaxed. He lifted one hand, but instead of the traditional Vulcan greeting he gave Spock a mock salute.

"Hi, Spock," he said, easily. "You know me, and I know you. I'm part of you. I always have been."

Spock said, "You are an illusion."

"If I am," the double said, "so are you." He laughed, easily. "You don't like me, do you, Spock? You've tried very hard to get rid of me. I don't know why you bother because you're stuck with me. Forever."

"I can control you," Spock said stonily.

"Really?" The double lifted one eyebrow. "I know you try, but you often find it difficult. That's because you work with Humans, Spock. It might have been better to stay on Vulcan. It might have been sensible to go to the Vulcan Science Academy and make your father proud of you, not that he would have ever admitted it. Your mother would have been pleased too. That might have been embarrassing though. She might have smiled at you in front of all those academics when you graduated, and in

front of your fellow students too. Your mother often used to embarrass you, didn't she, Spock? Wanting to put her arms round you when you were a child, wanting to hug you like Human mothers do. But you never allowed it. You sometimes literally pushed her away."

Spock began to walk, but the double kept up with him. "Have you ever wondered how that hurt her, Spock?"

"My mother understood Vulcans," Spock said.

"You're not a Vulcan," the double objected. "You're a hybrid."

"And you are an illusion," Spock said.

The double grinned. "Don't you wish I was! You're a dangerous combination, Spock. You're at war with yourself. Who do you think is going to win?"

"My internal wars ended many years ago," Spock said tightly. "I no longer doubt who I am."

"A Starfleet officer, eh, Spock?" the double mocked. "The best Science Officer in the Fleet? That description gave you a little kick of un-Vulcan pride, didn't it? Especially coming from Captain Kirk."

Spock increased his speed but the double kept up with him easily.

"Did you think he said it because he liked you, Spock? You misread the signs. He just didn't want to lose you because of all the official hassle involved in replacing you. It wasn't personal. Maybe you've worked well together, but then Captain Kirk works well with almost everybody. You like to think Captain Kirk is your friend, don't you Spock, but you're just another officer to him. Why should

he be friends with you? Friendship is a partnership, give and take. You can't give, Spock, you never could. Not to your mother, not to Kirk, not to anyone."

Spock could feel a sensation of frustration and anger beginning to burn inside him. He tried to control it. Unlike Kirk and McCoy he knew exactly where he was and what was happening to him, but he could not stop the thoughts from dredging up out of the depths of his mind. He could not banish the grinning double who represented everything he had tried so hard to suppress.

"And you do care about Captain Kirk's friendship, don't you Spock?" the double insisted. "You care. Wouldn't it be nice to know that Kirk likes you for yourself and not just because you're an excellent Science Officer, a dependable second in command. You care, Spock. A Vulcan wouldn't, a pure blooded Vulcan wouldn't care at all. But you do. How Human, how terribly Human."

It stopped suddenly and caught Spock's arm, spinning him round. Such was the entity's power that Spock felt the hand on his arm pulling him. He turned despite himself.

"I'm the real Commander Spock." The double's smile was warm and charming. "I'm sure Captain Kirk would prefer me to you. We could share laughter and shore leave and women. What can he share with you? You have nothing to give, Spock. No Vulcan has anything to offer a Human except efficiency." The voice turned suddenly accusing. "But you're not even very efficient, are you? That's why you're down here on this planet. You're a failure, Spock. A failed Vulcan. A failed Human. You've failed your Captain, failed your ship..."

expression on his face that Kirk and McCoy would not have recognised. His fist shot out and caught the double full in the mouth. The double staggered and fell. There was blood on Spock's knuckles and blood on the double's mouth, red blood. Spock stared at his fist as if it did not belong to him. But he was in control now. The quick surge of fury had calmed him.

The double got up, laughing. "How Human, Spock. You get better all the time."

Spock stared at him, his mind devoid of all thought, and as he stared the figure wavered, shifted out of focus, disappeared. Spock knew he had won a victory, but the fight was not yet over. And he was no nearer to rescuing Kirk and McCoy.

Captain James Kirk was standing in a long corridor. The floor was stone, the walls blank and grey. Torches flamed on high brackets. Their constant burning had stained the high curved ceiling with soot.

Kirk walked forward. His boots echoed dismally. He passed huge doors with heavy bolts and small observation grills set too high for him to look into. There was movement behind the doors: a scuffling sound; a scraping on wood; noises that sounded like breathing but stopped when he tried to listen more carefully.

There were living things in those hidden cells and they knew he was there. Something about the sounds they made convinced him that they were not human. He knew they were imprisoned against their will and he had an unpleasant feeling that they were waiting. Waiting for a chance to break free.

Spock twisted round with an

He had another thought: they were

hungry. And he was food. They sensed him. They smelled him. They hungered for him. He was overcome with an intense desire to know what they looked like. The shifting furtive noises began to get on his nerves. Who were they? Why were they imprisoned?

He walked like a man treading on glass. The corridor curved, another long expanse empty in front of him. More doors, more sounds. He turned. The corridor stretched behind him, backwards or forwards it made no difference. He had a sudden fear that he would walk like this forever, menaced by the hidden predators snuffling in their cells.

Perhaps he was their jailer. Perhaps he had put them there. No wonder they hated him. Had he imprisoned them, sometime in the past? He could not remember. He was a Starship Captain, that much he knew, but the memories of his missions were hazy.

He had made decisions, life and death decisions, on many planets and involving many cultures, decisions that he had believed were correct and humane, but how could he be sure? What happened after he had warped away into deep space in the safety and comfort of the Enterprise and the victims of his presumed wisdom were left to bear the consequences? And in other cases he had made no decisions. Constrained by the ruling of the Prime Directive he had never offered the help that could possibly have wiped out generations of future suffering.

What right had Starfleet to say that he should not give aid to struggling cultures? What right had Starfleet's representatives to withhold the knowledge that could prevent future pain? What right had he to play god with any alien planet and its population? He had put these captives in their cells. They

were his mistakes! And they knew him. They knew him for what he was. Flawed. A man who played god and hid his errors behind the excuse of obeying orders.

Something massive smashed against the inside of one of the doors. It was so unexpected after the small and furtive noises that Kirk twisted round against the opposite wall, shocked. He saw the door move. It creaked. The hinges strained. And then there was silence. Even the flames stopped sputtering.

Kirk knew with a horrible certainty that whatever was behind the door was gathering itself for another assault, and this time it would be successful. It knew the cause of its pain was out in the corridor, defenceless. The door would smash open. The door would tear from its hinges. The door would splinter into a thousand pieces, and he would have to face a monster of his own making. A monster that hungered to destroy him.

The corridor held its breath. Kirk stared sightlessly, his eyes baffled with internal pain. Thoughts crowded his mind. Where is my ship? Where is my crew? Where is my First Officer, my friend? Where is McCoy, dependable McCoy? And the answer came: you are alone with your failures. There is no-one to reassure you that you acted wisely. Your friends have abandoned you.

But something deep in Kirk's mind could not accept that his crew would desert him. Not Spock, not McCoy, not Scotty... Uhura... Sulu... Chekov. The names flooded his mind and the entity that named itself Philos could not prevent it.

And then he saw Spock. Spock, surrounded by a shifting mist, looking down at what appeared to be a hole in the ground. Kirk knew that Spock was feeling a sense of desolation similar to his

own. The need to reach his First Officer obliterated everything else.

He called passionately, "Spock!"

His voice sounded cracked and harsh and Spock was deaf to it. He did not move. But Kirk was overwhelmed with the terrible knowledge that Spock was wrestling with some kind of internal demon. The desire to help his Vulcan friend was so strong he even stepped forward and stretched out his hand as if he could physically span the strange dimensions that separated them. He had totally forgotten his own fears.

"Spock!"

Incredibly Spock reacted. He straightened, looked up, looked round.

"Spock...!" Kirk yelled, overcome with emotion. "Here! I'm here...!"

For a split second he looked straight into Spock's eyes, and he saw recognition there.

Then Spock disappeared. Kirk was surrounded by a bright red mist that faded suddenly and took his consciousness with it, spinning into the darkness of an oblivion without dreams.

It surprised Spock to realise that his knuckles were still hurting. Again he marvelled dispassionately at the power that Philos commanded. The ground under his feet seem springy and soft. He looked down and saw grass. Obviously he was not supposed to believe he was on Vulcan. Earth, maybe? The sky was the colour of lead and there were grey stones all around him. It took Spock only a few moments to recognise them. Gravestones. This was an Earth cemetery of the type common to the twentieth century, and

still used by traditionalists in the twenty-third.

Spock walked forward. The stones leaned and tipped, mute memorials to men and women whose lives were probably no longer even memories among the living, whose names were empty letters engraved on stone. Spock was not sure he liked this method of commemorating the dead. It had a depressing finality about it that was alien to Vulcan teaching.

He tried to banish these unwanted thoughts. It was illogical to feel depressed by the stone symbols of Human mortality. They were part of Earth's culture not his. Why should they effect him?

"Because they will be part of your life," a voice said pleasantly in his head. "You have Humans you call your friends, Spock. This is where they will end."

A mist descended suddenly. Figures materialised out of its shifting depths. Spock felt the cold touch his bones. He was wearing a heavy black cloak of traditional Vulcan design, the formal costume of anyone witnessing the first part of the katra ritual. But this was not a Vulcan ceremony. This was an old-style Earth burial.

The pall bearers passed him, a coffin heavy on their shoulders. Mourners followed. Spock heard the sounds of weeping. He watched as the coffin was lowered. He saw a shrouded mourner throw the traditional handful of earth. It struck the coffin lid with a dull and final sound. He heard a bell tolling dismally. And then the mourners and the bearers moved slowly back. They were devoured by the mist. Spock was alone with the open grave.

"Go and look," the voice in his head

invited. "You know you're curious."

"This does not concern me," Spock said.

"It concerns you, Spock. Go and look."

Despite himself Spock stepped forward. It seemed to be a very long walk, but eventually he reached the edge of the grave and stared down. The name plate on the coffin was simple and clearly visible: James Tiberius Kirk.

"It will come," the voice said. "How will you deal with it, Spock?"

Spock wrapped the cloak tighter. The cold was biting into him.

"Vulcans do not grieve," he said. "It is illogical and unscientific to believe that the spirit ceases to exist when the body housing it no longer functions."

"If Vulcans do not grieve," the voice crawled in Spock's brain, "it is not because they have learned their school lessons by rote, as you seem to have done. It is because they are psychologically unable to behave in such an emotional fashion. It's easy for them, but it won't be so easy for you. You have Vulcan strength, Vulcan longevity, but you do not have the full Vulcan nature. You will grieve."

"No," Spock said. "I will... regret. But I will not suffer emotional pain. That is a Human characteristic."

"You have hundreds of Human characteristics, Spock. And one of the strongest is the need for friendship."

"No," Spock said.

"You cannot imagine life without your friend Kirk. You refuse to imagine

it."

"It is satisfying to serve with Captain Kirk," Spock admitted, "but one day I may be transferred, or the Captain will be given another ship. I have considered these possibilities. I will survive them."

"How will you survive Kirk's death?" the voice asked bluntly. "Thanks to your Vulcan physiology, and barring accidents, you will outlive him. You will probably outlive all the Humans you are serving with. And then you will be alone, Spock. Really alone."

Spock tried to banish the sneaking voice that he knew came from within himself. But the voice would not be silenced.

"That bothers you, doesn't it, Spock? You find it hard to make friends because of your Vulcan reserve, but you need friends to satisfy that inconvenient humanity your mother gave you. It worries you. It scares you. Admit it. One day your Vulcan body will be a burden to you, keeping you alive when all your Human friends are dead."

"I shall have my work," Spock said, tightly. "That will support me."

"Easy to say that now," the voice agreed. "But when they are all buried, your friends, gone forever, leaving you with nothing but empty years ahead, will your work be a suitable replacement for what you have lost? There will be no Humans to replace Captain Kirk and the Enterprise crew. They are your family, Spock. You will miss them all. When their Human mortality overtakes them you will be alone. You will miss Kirk. You will even miss McCoy. You will miss Uhura... and Scott..."

Spock made a supreme mental

effort to silence the insistent voice, but he knew it would fail. These were real fears, unspoken fears. Fears that he had buried deeply and tried to forget. And the entity had the power to use them. He could not fight on his own. A sense of overwhelming loneliness gripped him. His Vulcan body had saved his life many times with its alien biology, but in the end it would be a curse.

He stared down into the open grave. The stark shape of the coffin lay there with its simple name plate. Spock felt almost jealous of Kirk. He would never know this kind of misery. He would never have to look ahead into a bleak and desolate future...

"But neither do you," the voice whispered enticingly. "There is a way out, an easy way out. Join Captain Kirk. Let go. Sleep. It's easy. The Enterprise has gone. Captain Kirk has gone. There's nothing to live for. Let go..."

It was like a tempting lullaby. Spock swayed. Logic was deserting him. The sense of misery that engulfed him was so painful he wanted only to be rid of it.

"Kirk has gone," the voice soothed. "He was down here with you, you know that, you remember that. The real Kirk came down after you, but now he has gone. He lies in his coffin, the real Kirk. Join him... it's easy."

"Spock!"

The sound of his name jerked Spock out of his confusion. He looked up. And he saw Kirk standing near to him, reaching out his hand. Then Kirk disappeared. But the echo of his voice and his image stayed with Spock. It propelled him back into reality. He looked down at Kirk's coffin and as he looked the coffin split and crumbled, revealing itself to be

empty.

The gravestones disappeared. The grass melted. Spock was standing in a cave. Kirk and McCoy lay on the ground near to him. McCoy was on his back, apparently sound asleep, unmoving, but Kirk was twisting restlessly, eyes closed, his face contorted with effort.

"Spock...!" One hand stretched out. "Here! I'm here...!"

Spock knew better than to try and wake Kirk physically. Instead he sat down in a straight-backed meditation posture. He breathed slowly and deeply. Nothing was going to divert him now. The entity had shown him its weaknesses. If he could regain Kirk's mind and then McCoy's there was a chance, a small chance, that he could find a way to free them and to free the Enterprise from the entity's control. But he needed help. He knew that he was not strong enough to do it on his own. He needed Kirk. He needed McCoy.

Spock sat with his eyes open but unfocused. He reached out to Kirk not only with all the power his Vulcan training had given him but with his Human need to help his friend. For once he did not try and suppress his emotions. He accepted them. He used them.

And he felt his mind, and Kirk's mind, slowly melding together...

CHAPTER FIVE

"Spock," Kirk sat up groggily, rubbing his head, "where are we?"

"Where we have been since we beamed down, Captain."

"We never seem to go far on this

planet," Kirk said, "but a lot seems to happen."

"That would seem to be a fair assessment," Spock agreed.

"If you'll excuse a very Human display of emotion, Mr Spock, I have to admit that I'm very pleased to see you."

"I am similarly pleased to see you, Captain."

Kirk looked at McCoy, who still seemed to be sleeping soundly.

"Can we wake Bones?"

"I hope so, Captain."

"How?"

"By entering whatever world he is inhabiting," Spock said.

Kirk stared at the sleeping Doctor. "Will Philos let us do that?"

"It is possible that Philos will not be able to prevent us, Captain."

"Spock!" Kirk grabbed his surprised Science Officer by the arm. "You've found a way to fight this creature? I knew you would."

"Your enthusiasm is premature, Captain," Spock said, politely disengaging Kirk's hand. "I merely have some hypotheses, as yet untested."

"You had one before we were split up," Kirk remembered. "You were going to tell us. Let's hear it now."

"Captain," Spock put his hands carefully behind his back, "recent events have led me to draw several conclusions about our predicament. I realise now that I may have been wrong in my original

assessment of our situation."

Kirk grinned at McCoy's recumbent body. "Bones, you'll never forgive yourself for missing this."

"I now believe that your presence, and that of the Doctor, does give us a combined strength," Spock admitted, pointedly ignoring the interruption. "We have also been assuming that the entity enjoys our fear, but it could be that it simply needs to experience what we term emotion. Fear, hatred, despair, happiness, I do not think it can distinguish between them. It is variety and intensity that it needs. That is what it craves."

"But why were most of our experiences frightening?" Kirk wondered.

"The entity probes into the subconscious of its victims, Captain," Spock said. "At first it discovers surface desires. Doctor McCoy's wish for the honour of making a medical breakthrough, your own dislike of the Klingons. Then it probes deeper, and as most of us hide those things we fear or refuse to acknowledge, it discovers our darker side, our personal nightmares."

"But surely Philos is making the images we've been seeing, Spock? Making them for us to react to?"

"I believe we have been producing our own images, Captain," Spock said. "That is what I wanted to tell you before the entity separated us. I believe it is blind. It does not need to see. It only... feels. When we first beamed down to this planet you and Doctor McCoy saw a highly coloured landscape taken from some past memory. I also saw it, but when I imagined a Vulcan zy'ta plant I saw that too. I was surprised but my surprise did not alert the entity, it simply accepted the emotion. At the time I did not draw the correct conclusions from

this experiment."

"What about the Enterprise, Spock?" Kirk wondered. "We all experienced the illusions there."

"Affirmative, Captain," Spock agreed. "The entity seems to use its abilities in two different ways. From a distance it will produce external illusions that I believe are taken from an individual's knowledge of activities that will cause harm. These generally produce a fast emotional response. An individual or perhaps a group will physically participate. But when its victims are on the planet's surface the entity can probe more deeply. The participation of the physical body becomes unnecessary, probably restrictive, and so it is placed in some kind of suspended animation. If the illusions experienced are terrifying enough the brain will effectively 'die'. Once this happens the the bodily functions will obviously cease. I believe this is why Kolo said that visitors went 'inside out'. Their inner terrors erupted and effectively killed them. The entity quite possibly does not intend this to happen and indeed would probably prefer that it did not, but it cannot prevent it. Like all addicts it lacks control, it has to satisfy its needs. It pushes its victims to the limit and eventually destroys them while doing so."

Kirk looked in anguish at McCoy. "What's he going through, Spock?"

"Doctor McCoy may be more psychologically suited to resisting nightmares than you think," Spock said. "Members of the medical profession need considerable mental strength. I think Doctor McCoy has frequently demonstrated that he has that strength. However, we must bring him back to reality."

"We?" Kirk repeated. "What can I

do?"

"Captain..." Spock began, and then his voice softened slightly. "Jim... I am asking you to trust me. To allow me to enter your mind and link it with my own. I will then attempt to meld with Doctor McCoy. If I am successful we will be able to contact him in whatever reality he is currently experiencing."

"You need me, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"I need you," Spock confirmed. "This entity has great power. I do not wish to risk the chance of it grasping my mind again. Together we have strength of a kind I do not believe the entity fully understands." He paused. "I am not certain that I understand it myself. But there are dangers. I have never attempted to do this before. It is possible that the entity may again be able to capture our minds and separate us. I cannot offer any guarantee either of safety or success."

"Let's do it," Kirk said. He was still staring at McCoy.

McCoy moved restlessly, his hands clenched. Kirk remembered the Doctor standing over him, ready to defend him from Spock's monster. "Let's do it, Spock. Let's do it now."

Doctor McCoy was staring at the transporter. It had destroyed the two men he held in higher regard than any others. His friends. He had always considered Spock his friend whether or not the contrary Vulcan cared to accept the description. Now they were gone. There would be a new Captain on the Enterprise Bridge, a new First Officer. Nothing would ever be the same again. McCoy was filled with a great sadness, a great sense of desolation. Did he want to serve under a new commanding officer?

How could he look at that command chair, that science station and not remember...

He watched Scott testing the transporter. The beams sparkled and hummed. On the planet below them a community of settlers were coming out of the incubation period of Rasson's Fever. If he did not get to them they would die. They needed the serum he already carried in his medical kit. They needed it now.

McCoy looked at Scott. The Chief Engineer was not happy. It showed on his face as he tested the transporter.

"I don't like it," Scott said, as if he could read McCoy's thoughts. "It seems to be working, but I have this feeling in my bones... I'd rather you waited, Doctor. I'd like to do more tests."

But McCoy - suddenly felt lightheaded. *I can do my duty, he thought, and if I end up as a tangle of molecules, or spread out like paste over the universe, then at least I won't have to come back to the Enterprise and find a stranger in the Captain's chair and a stranger at the science station.*

A slow smile spread over his face. Scott looked at him in amazement. *This way it's easy, McCoy thought. Just step onto that pad. Who'd have thought I'd be pleased to step into the transporter...?*

"I'm going down," he said, "on my own. No point in risking a Security team, they can't do anything. Those settlers need a medical man."

"Doctor McCoy," Scott protested, "this is foolish. Let me run a few more tests."

McCoy stepped forward. Scott put a restraining hand on his arm. "Please, Doctor. Isn't it bad enough we've lost the Captain and Mr Spock? We don't want to

lose you too."

"I'm replaceable," McCoy said. He added softly, "Jim and Spock might not be, but I am. I'm just an old country doctor who made good. There are plenty more where I come from."

"And if I refuse to send you down?" Scott asked.

"You can't," McCoy said. "There's a medical emergency down there and I'm needed."

Scott stared at him for a few more moments as if trying to fathom out what was going on in McCoy's mind. Then he shrugged. "Whatever you say, Doctor." And added under his breath, "But I'm not responsible. I've warned you. I canna do any more than that."

McCoy had never felt so comfortable about approaching the transporter. It was no longer a monster, it was a friend. It was going to take him away from the pain of loss. He knew it was going to malfunction. He welcomed it. Death was a friend. Death was escape. Death meant there would be no more pain, no sense of loss. He stood on the pad. In a dream he watched Scott's had reach for the controls...

The transporter sparkled into life. Two figures began to form. McCoy stared in total amazement. He sensed rather than saw Scott's hand move on the transporter lever, then Kirk and Spock stepped forward, grabbed an arm each and pulled him off the pad.

"Sorry to disrupt your journey, Bones," Kirk said, "but you're coming back with us."

"How did I get here?" McCoy asked,

bemused, staring at the dark cave walls.

"You never went away," Kirk said.

"I was on the Enterprise," McCoy remembered. "I was in the Transporter Room." He shook his head in disbelief. "That damned transporter was malfunctioning... and I was glad of it. I wanted to die. I really wanted to die." He stared up at Spock. "What would have happened, Spock?"

"If your mind accepted that you were dying, you would die, Doctor," Spock said.

"But why? I thought this... creature... didn't really want to harm us?"

"Like all sentient life forms it is naturally self-protective. It knows now that together we can endanger it. Removing you would at least reduce our strength. As it cannot physically touch us it had to do it in another way, in your case by persuading you that life was no longer worth living."

"How do you know that's what I was feeling?" McCoy asked suspiciously.

"I have had to use a variation of the Vulcan mind meld, Doctor," Spock said. "I apologise for the intrusion into your thoughts, but it was necessary."

"What're you apologising for?" McCoy grinned suddenly. "You saved my life."

"Not yet," Spock said. "We have still to get back to the Enterprise."

"What about the Enterprise, Spock?" Kirk asked tightly. "What about my ship? My crew?"

"I believe the Enterprise is still in orbit, Captain," Spock said. "I have the

highest regard for Mr Scott's efficiency but he is in an unenviable position. Given his knowledge of Cerus Alpha he would certainly not send down a search party. His logical course of action would be to take the Enterprise out of orbit and I believe he will do this when he feels he has exhausted the other options open to him. The longer he remains the greater the danger to the ship."

"He probably knows where we are," Kirk said. "He'll have our beam-down coordinates and a quick scan will show that we haven't moved."

"I do not believe Mr Scott will trust any information he receives from Cerus Alpha without confirmation," Spock said. "He is well aware of the entity's power. But if I can be certain his mind is clear there are certain regulation code words I can use that will convince him the order to beam up is genuine. We must also be certain that Mr Scott's mind is free of all alien control when he works the transporter. It would be too easy for the entity to use that method to rid itself of us."

McCoy shivered. Suddenly death in the transporter no longer seemed a pleasant prospect.

"I have absolute faith in Mr Scott," Kirk said. "He'll make the correct decisions, if he's able. But what if the entity is still holding the Enterprise?"

"Then none of us will escape," Spock said simply. "My plan depends on the Enterprise being free from the entity's control."

"I hope you've got your fingers crossed," McCoy muttered.

Spock looked briefly surprised. "I have no need to employ superstitious gestures, Doctor. Logic dictates that my

assumption will be correct."

"Why?" McCoy demanded.

"The entity does not need the Enterprise, Doctor. It has us."

"But surely it'd want to keep the Enterprise inoperative?" McCoy insisted.

"This is not a war, Doctor," Spock said. "The entity is responding to its emotions, a totally irrational process but one which as a Human you should be able to appreciate. If it had wanted to destroy the Enterprise it would have done so by now."

"Can you be sure it hasn't?" Kirk asked.

Spock hesitated. "Captain, I must ask you to believe me. I am certain the Enterprise has not been destroyed."

"Would you have felt it, Spock?" Kirk wondered. "You felt the death of the Intrepid."

"But that was a Vulcan ship," McCoy objected. "I know you said you felt it die, Spock, but surely that's because you're tuned in to the Vulcan group mind?"

"I believe," Spock said awkwardly, "that I may have evolved a... similar... affinity for the Enterprise."

Kirk stared at his First Officer. "Perhaps we've all established some kind of rapport with each other," he said. "Do you think that's possible, Spock?"

"I would not previously have thought it possible among Humans," Spock admitted, "but certain occurrences in the past, and on this planet, have led me to revise my opinions."

Kirk stared at him. "I saw you, didn't I Spock? I saw you... and you saw me?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Spock," Kirk said, "I felt... desolation. It was terrible. Is that what you were feeling?"

Spock looked away, clearly uncomfortable. "Yes, Captain. The entity was trying to persuade me that life was no longer worth living."

"How was it doing that?" Kirk wondered. "That hole in the ground, was it a grave? Did that have something to do with it?"

"I would prefer not to discuss it, Captain," Spock said, suddenly very Vulcan. "The memory is not a pleasant one. I will admit, however, that by reaching out to me you probably saved my life." His expression softened briefly. "I have my secret nightmares, Jim. A Human legacy, perhaps. Maybe facing them has strengthened me."

"So," McCoy said in an attempt to lighten the mood, "we're a threesome. I never thought I'd end up in a menage a trois with two fellas... and one of them a Vulcan!" He grinned. "Well, what're we waiting for? What do we have to do, Spock?"

"You must engage the entity's attention while I endeavour to establish whether or not Mr Scott's mind is still under the entity's control. If it is not I will give the order to beam us up." Spock turned with Starfleet formality to Kirk. "There is an element of danger involved, Captain. Do I have your permission to continue?"

"Do we have any other options?" Kirk wondered, knowing the answer.

"I cannot think of any, Captain."

"That rather narrows the choice," McCoy said.

"So how do we keep the entity occupied, Spock?" Kirk prompted.

"You must both feed the entity's need for emotional stimulus by imagining yourselves in an intensely emotional situation," Spock said. "Obviously a pleasant one will be easier for you to control."

"What kind of emotional situation?" McCoy asked suspiciously.

"Really, Doctor," Spock said with a hint of un-Vulcan irritation, "you can hardly expect me to make suggestions. There must be some activities that you find intensely pleasurable."

"Well... yes, there are," McCoy admitted. "Are you... er... going to be aware of what we're thinking about?"

"Only peripherally," Spock said. "Why?"

McCoy fidgeted. "Well... it could be kinda... embarrassing."

This time Spock's irritation was obvious. "Doctor, I have served with Humans for a number of years, and have observed you closely. I assure you that nothing you do can embarrass me."

"I was thinking of my embarrassment," McCoy muttered, "not yours."

"Perhaps you haven't observed us in every single situation, Spock," Kirk suggested gently.

Spock looked blank.

"There are some pleasant things we usually do in private," Kirk amplified.

"And I don't like the idea that you might be watching," McCoy stated. "Even if it is only make-believe."

"Doctor," Spock said with a return of his Vulcan patience, "you can be embarrassed... or dead. Which would you prefer?"

"I'll be embarrassed," McCoy said.

"Very sensible," Spock agreed.

It was the kind of day you always dreamed about but very rarely experienced. Leonard McCoy sat in a large wooden rocking chair. A ceiling fan gently stirred the warm early evening air. The veranda on his right opened on to a sweeping expanse of grass and trees. The sky was dotted with a few fluffy clouds. McCoy sipped his iced drink and smiled.

A girl in a long-skirted riding costume rode side saddle over a series of small jumps. Negotiating them all quite elegantly she turned and waved towards the house. McCoy waved back and smiled. Maybe she couldn't see him but she knew he was there. Later she would come in and talk, and later still they would meet for dinner, and later yet, they would dance. And later...?

The smile stayed on McCoy's face. It was a long time since he had courted a girl in a real old-fashioned way. For McCoy the courtship and the waiting were as sensually satisfying as the final conquest.

The trouble was he kept feeling it was too good to be true.

James T Kirk was in the process of making a decision, and it had nothing to do with Starfleet or the Enterprise. He was surrounded by beautiful young women and one of them he knew for certain would definitely be his companion for the evening... and the night.

The problem was deciding which one. They were all desirable and wore a variety of seductive costumes that represented a selection of his fantasies. He smiled at a statuesque blonde. She smiled back, sleek in an evening dress that was high at the front but plunged to an almost indecent depth at the back. Like many men Kirk found what you didn't see every bit as as tantalising as what you did... maybe more so, at least to begin with. He shifted his gaze to a Japanese girl in a magnificent traditional costume. She lowered her head slowly but her eyes gave him a message that belied her innocent expression.

Kirk sighed. It was like a dream. The trouble was, he had this distinct feeling that it *was* a dream. He simply hoped he would not wake up too soon.

It had been the most pleasant evening McCoy could remember for a very long time. The meal, the dancing, the gentle courtship. The exchange of glances, light touches that promised more...

They had parted, but McCoy knew that was just a move in the game. The open windows of his room let in the moonlit and the warm night air.

He waited.

The door opened.

McCoy looked up and smiled a

welcome.

Spock stepped into the room.

James T Kirk made his final decision: the Japanese girl. She hinted at the exotic, the unknown. The idea of slowly removing that magnificent costume excited him. He waved a dismissive hand to banish the crowd of hopefuls and turned to a table loaded with fruit and wine. Two crystal glasses stood conveniently ready. He poured wine into each, and turned back again, holding one out to his chosen companion for the night.

Except that the Japanese girl had turned into Mr Spock, who looked at the wine in mild surprise.

Kirk sighed. "I knew it was too good to last," he said.

"You did it on purpose," McCoy accused as he stepped off the transporter pad, watched by a surprised Mr Scott. "Admit it, Spock. You waited, and did it on purpose."

"I did nothing on purpose," Spock said. "When you had both engaged the entity's attention I was able to contact the Enterprise. I did not know that I would appear to both of you momentarily prior to our beaming up."

"I think he chose his time rather well," Kirk said. "Another five minutes and it could have been acutely embarrassing."

Scott listened curiously. "Would somebody like to explain to me what's been going on?"

"Later," Kirk grinned. He turned to Spock. "Are we free of the entity's influence, Spock?"

"At the moment, Captain. I think our rapid escape may have disorientated it. I would not like to estimate how long this situation will last."

Kirk strode over to the communicator. "Kirk to Bridge."

"Sulu here, Captain."

"Warp speed, Mr Sulu. Get us away... fast."

There was a brief pause. "But Captain..." Sulu sounded surprised, "hasn't Mr Scott explained?"

"A minor problem," the Chief Engineer said hastily as Kirk turned to him. "A little circuitry sabotage after you'd beamed down, while we were still controlled by that Cerus Alpha beastie."

"We cannot achieve warp speed, Mr Scott?" Spock asked.

"Not at present," Scott admitted. "We're working on it. Space normal is possible."

"Then space normal it'll have to be." Kirk turned to the door. It swished open. Almost at once the red alert siren blared, the warning light flashed vividly.

Kirk ran to the nearest communicator. "What's happening, Mr Sulu?"

The Helmsman's voice was clear and steady. "Klingon Bird of Prey to port, sir. Sensors show she's preparing to attack. I have raised shields."

Kirk raced for the turbolift. "This,"

he said tightly, "is all I need!"

"We can't outrun them," Kirk said, "and I don't want to fight. What are they doing here, anyway?"

"Are they really here, sir?" Chekov wondered, staring at the ominous shape growing larger in the viewscreen. And added under his breath, "Are *we* really here?"

"That is an illogical remark, Mr Chekov," Spock said, adjusting the scanner. "Unless we beam down to Cerus Alpha we cannot be anywhere else but on the Enterprise. The problem is not where we are but how long we will be able to operate without the entity's interference."

"Philos must know he's lost us by now," Kirk said.

"Undoubtedly," Spock agreed.

"Why hasn't he chased us?" Kirk wondered. "At this speed we must still be in his range."

"Perhaps he... it.. is suffering," Spock said.

"Withdrawal symptoms?" Kirk guessed.

"We cannot know how our escape affected the entity, Captain. It may need time to recover."

"Let's hope so," Kirk muttered.

"Enemy ship has slowed to space normal," Sulu reported.

"So that's how they want it," Kirk said. "Cat and mouse."

"The Klingon Captain is probably

wondering why we don't engage warp speed," Sulu guessed.

"Good. That'll keep him confused," Kirk punched the control panel. "Mr Scott, how soon can I have warp eight?"

"We're working on it, Captain."

"Work faster, Mr Scott," Kirk requested.

There was a brief pause. Kirk could imagine Mr Scott's long suffering expression.

"Aye aye, sir."

The Bird of Prey seemed to float in space just outside effective firing range. Kirk tried to imagine its Captain's thoughts. He would be wondering why the Enterprise did not attack, why she was ambling at such a slow speed. Being a Klingon he would probably be suspecting a trap. Kirk decided to try and play on that suspicion.

"Lieutenant Uhura," he turned the command chair, "open a hailing frequency."

"Aye, sir." Uhura's long fingers with their beautifully shaped nails flicked over the switches.

There was something about the Bird of Prey that bothered Kirk.

"Mr Chekov," he requested, "increase magnification to maximum."

The Klingon ship suddenly filled the viewscreen with its dark bulk.

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, "that does not look like a standard Klingon design to me."

"It would appear to have some

modifications." Spock turned from the scanner and started to feed data into the computer. He surveyed the results, one eyebrow lifting slightly. "Interesting. A comparison of our known technical knowledge with the computer scan would indicate that this ship is a prototype."

"On a test run?" Kirk wondered.

"They don't seem too anxious to test their fire power, sir," Sulu remarked.

"I believe our speed is bothering them," Kirk said. "I'll bet they're thinking up all kinds of reasons for it."

"Let's hope they don't hit on the right one," Sulu said quietly.

Kirk turned to Spock again and as he did so he saw the Vulcan stiffen. Briefly Spock's hand touched his forehead.

"Mr Spock?" Kirk's voice was anxious. "Are you all right?"

And then Kirk felt it too, felt the ominous touching of his mind by something alien and hungry, something greedy for sensation. Something that would not - could not - let them escape. Even knowing that they could be dangerous to it, although less so at this greater distance, the entity sought them out. It would risk the danger, even enjoy the danger. The resulting flood of sensation was its only single-minded desire.

Kirk's fingers touched the controls on the command chair. "Mr Scott, I need warp speed... now."

"Captain," Scott responded promptly, "we have some critical circuitry adjustments to make. I need another ten minutes at least."

"How critical, Mr Scott?" Kirk asked.

"Very critical, sir," the Chief Engineer said. "No margin for error."

"Stop work, Mr Scott," Kirk said.

There was a pause that seemed to last for a very long time. "Aye, Captain," Scott confirmed. Something in his voice told Kirk that he understood more than he would admit on the communicator.

"And await further orders," Kirk added.

Another pause.

"Understood, Captain," Scott said softly.

The turbolift door opened. Doctor McCoy stepped onto the Bridge and Kirk knew from his expression that McCoy had also experienced that intrusive touching of the mind, like the grasping of invisible hooked fingers. McCoy looked quickly at Kirk and Spock.

"Jim," his voice sounded haunted, "are we ever going to get away from this thing?"

"Captain," Uhura said suddenly, "I'm getting a response from the Klingons."

Spock came and stood behind Kirk's chair.

"Why doesn't Philos grab those Klingons?" McCoy muttered.

"Maybe he has," Spock said softly.

"So maybe he'll like them better than us... and let us go?" McCoy suggested.

"I do not think so," Spock said.

"Two ships equal double the fun?" McCoy nodded. "I suppose I should've guessed."

Suddenly a barbaric face with prominent brow ridges appeared on the viewscreen. The red glow of the alien Bridge made the Klingon seem surrounded by fire.

"Captain Kirk?" The voice was harsh and mocking. "I am Commander Kln'ash. I am delighted to meet you at last. I have heard a great deal about you and your pet Vulcan and, of course, about your famous Starship Enterprise."

"I'm delighted that you're delighted," Kirk said lightly. "Perhaps you'd like to explain your presence here? This is Federation territory."

The Klingon laughed. "That point is debatable, Captain. You tend to place your boundaries where convenient to yourselves. But you know why we are here. You have already scanned us. We are testing a new ship with some modifications that will amaze you when we demonstrate them. Unfortunately you will not be able to convey this interesting information to Starfleet Command."

"An unprovoked attack will be met with resistance," Kirk said. "You might be similarly... amazed."

There was a brief pause. "We know the capabilities of the Enterprise, Captain Kirk."

"Or think you do," Kirk amended. He produced his most charming smile. "You might like to consider why we are still at space normal speed."

"Perhaps because your engines will not permit you to go faster?" Kln'ash

suggested with silky sarcasm.

"Perhaps," Kirk agreed. "Would you like to test your theory? You might find the results... interesting."

There was a pause. Then Kirk saw the Klingon match his smile.

"Thank you for the invitation, Captain. I shall consider it. I have a feeling that a confrontation will be... interesting... for both of us."

The screen blanked out.

"Nice try," McCoy said. "But I don't think you fooled him."

"I don't think so either," Kirk agreed. He suddenly realised that Spock was standing rigidly behind his chair. Turning he saw the Vulcan's face was sheened with sweat.

"Mr Spock...?" For a moment all thoughts of the Klingons left Kirk's mind. "Are you all right?"

McCoy moved forward but Spock held up a restraining hand.

"Do not... concern yourself about me, Doctor." Each word sounded painful. "I do not require... medical aid. Captain, if Mr Chekov could man the science station...?"

Chekov ran to his new position. Another crewman took over his place at the control console. Kirk saw Spock's knuckles whiten as he grasped the back of the command chair, then the viewscreen claimed his full attention. The Bird of Prey had swung round. Red lights glowed angrily on its sides.

The Klingon Commander's voice came on audio. "I accept your invitation to battle, Captain!"

"Did I really issue one?" Kirk muttered. And louder, "Stand by main phasers."

"Jim," McCoy said anxiously. "If someone jams the phaser power... we could blow ourselves up."

"I know," Kirk said softly. "I know. But I don't want to alarm the crew. I want them to think we're in control." He looked at Spock. Sweat was rivuleting down the Vulcan's face. "Spock's having a hard enough fight as it is."

The red lights on the Klingon ship grew brighter. They danced like flames. Then one began to spin. It flared into a whirling globe and hurled itself with ferocious speed at the Enterprise. For a moment the viewscreen was a mad furnace of colour. The Enterprise shuddered, jolting the crew violently in their seats. The Bridge lights blinked out, then on again. The viewscreen cleared. The Bird of Prey had disappeared.

"Damage report, Mr Scott?" Kirk ordered.

"Shields are holding, sir," Scott sounded both surprised and angry, "but we've a power drain. What was that they threw at us? I've never experienced anything like it before."

"Something new," Kirk said grimly.

"I hope they haven't got too many of them." Scott's voice was worried. "A couple more attacks like that and I fancy our shields will be breached."

"Bird of Prey coming into range, Captain." Sulu sounded as calm as if he was on a training manoeuvre.

"Enemy ship preparing to fire," Chekov reported. He added, "I think."

"Don't think, Mr Chekov," Kirk snapped, more abruptly than he intended. "Give me facts."

"Readings are erratic, Captain. They've raised a screen. It distorts my scan."

The Bird of Prey glowed with red lights again. Swelling into a spinning circle one of them detached itself and hurtled towards the Enterprise.

"Hard to port, Mr Sulu," Kirk ordered.

He was intensely relieved when the Enterprise responded with her customary speed. The pulsing red globe altered direction sharply.

"Enemy weapon is following us, sir!" Sulu observed in amazement.

"Evasive action," Kirk said.

He guessed it was too late and he was right. The Enterprise shuddered, and again the crew were shaken like rag dolls. This time the lights took longer to come on again.

Scott's voice came from the intercom. "Power drain is increasing, Captain. All shields are half strength."

Kirk glanced at Spock. The Vulcan looked like a corpse. His face was tense and colourless, his eyes fixed sightlessly on a spot above Kirk's head. Kirk could only guess at the internal battle Spock was fighting to keep the Enterprise free from the entity's control. Then he looked at Chekov. He felt sorry for the young Ensign, but he needed information.

"Readings, Mr Chekov?"

"I can't make any sense of them, Captain," Chekov apologised. "I just get...

nonsense."

"Then guess, Mr Chekov," Kirk suggested.

"I believe the weapon may actually be attracted by our shields, Captain. And when it hits them it... it... eats them."

"Very poetic," Kirk said, "although I'm not sure what Mr Spock would think of that as a scientific assessment. Suggestions for defence?"

Chekov looked as haggard as Spock. He shrugged hopelessly. "Outrun them, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr Chekov," Kirk said.

"Captain," Uhura said, "the Klingons are hailing us again."

Kirk spun his chair round. "Put them on visual, Lieutenant."

Commander Kln'ash smiled from the red haze of the enemy Bridge.

"Well, Captain Kirk," there was naked triumph in his voice now, "you have sampled two of our little surprises. Why haven't you retaliated? Why don't you use your phasers? Or photon torpedoes? Or the other secret weapons you would like me to believe you have?" He laughed, a harsh rattling sound. "Come now, Captain Kirk, don't make it too easy for me. I thought you would be a more worthy opponent."

The screen blanked out.

"Mr Chekov," Kirk said quietly, "if those weapons are attracted by our shields could they also be attracted by our phaser beams?"

"That's very possible, Captain," Chekov agreed.

"And the photon torpedoes?"

"Less likely, sir. But they might have something else that could effect them."

"We either fight... or run," Kirk said, "and as Commander Kln'ash seems a little too anxious for me to fight, it's going to be run." He touched the control panel. "Mr Scott, resume work on the engines. I need warp speed."

"Captain," Scott sounded anxious, "if anything... interferes... with our work, you won't even have space normal to get home on."

Kirk looked at Spock. The Vulcan appeared to be swaying.

"I am aware of that, Mr Scott," Kirk said. "Please begin your repair work. As fast as possible."

"Aye, sir," Scott confirmed unhappily.

"Jim," McCoy moved closer to Kirk's chair, "if this doesn't work we'll be stranded. Philos will never let us go."

"If this doesn't work, we'll be dead," Kirk said softly. "Captain Kln'ash won't let us go either. He can't afford to. We know too much about his prototype ship as it is."

"Klingon moving to port, Captain," Sulu reported suddenly.

"Increased heat readings, Captain," Chekov put in quickly. "I believe they are preparing to attack again."

"Mr Scott," Kirk rapped. "Warp speed. Now."

"I'm sorry, Captain..." Scott's voice sounded anguished.

The Bird of Prey loomed into view. Red lights began flash on its sides, growing larger. Behind Kirk's chair Spock collapsed suddenly on the floor. Doctor McCoy was at his side immediately. Spock struggled to rise.

"Spock, keep still," McCoy ordered.

"Captain," Spock grasped Kirk's chair and pulled himself up, "I have failed. The... entity... has renewed it's strength..." A look of horror, so alien to his normal calm expression, suddenly distorted the Vulcan's face. "Both ships!" he said hoarsely. "It has... both ships!"

"Now the games really start," McCoy said quietly.

The red sphere glowed and spun on the Bird of Prey's side. The Bridge crew stared at it. Sulu's hands were poised over the controls but they all knew that evasive action, however skilled, was useless.

They waited.

Kirk fought an impulse to order phaser fire. If they were to be destroyed he wanted to take the Klingon ship with him. Maybe he should have risked retaliation sooner. Maybe Spock's mental defences would have protected them long enough. Maybe the entity would not even have tried to prevent them from destroying the Bird of Prey.

Had he made the right decisions? He felt his emotions churning his thoughts. He knew why it was happening and tried to control it. He had a brief feeling that Spock was helping him. He glanced at his First Officer, but Spock was staring at the viewscreen. The whirling red sphere stopped spinning, its colours faded. It contracted... and disappeared.

"They didn't fire," Sulu said in

amazement. "Why didn't they fire?"

"Maybe they are playing games?" Chekov suggested.

"They are not playing games," Spock said soberly. "Something is playing with them."

"The creature from Cerus Alpha?" Chekov guessed.

"Correct, Ensign."

"And will it soon... play... with us?" Chekov wondered.

"I believe so," Spock said impassively.

Kirk was trying to contact the Engine Room. "Mr Scott, come in, please. Mr Scott...?" He punched another control. "Security, there's no response from the Engine Room. Check it out and report to me."

The Klingon ship floated in space well within range of the Enterprise. Kirk stared at it in frustration.

"Captain? Engine room here." The Security man sounded amazed. "Sir, they're all unconscious. Mr Scott... everyone. I've checked for escaped fumes... there's nothing, but they're all out cold."

"Get a medical team down there," Kirk ordered. He glanced at McCoy. "Not that I think they'll be able to do anything. Those men'll wake up when Philo wants them to."

McCoy added under his breath, "If he wants them to."

Kirk stared at the Bird of Prey, waiting for any signs of life.

"Jim, what d'you think is going on in that ship?" McCoy wondered.

Kirk shrugged. "I don't know, but if Philo wants emotion he'll certainly get it from Klingons."

The viewscreen suddenly flooded with red light. The Klingon Commander appeared, his face distorted with fury. "Captain Kirk! What are you doing to my crew?"

Kirk almost felt sorry for him. "I'm not doing anything, Commander Kln'ash."

"Is this your new weapon? Mind control? It is unworthy of the Federation! It is not the weapon of a warrior!"

"Listen," Kirk said, "you can believe it or not, but we aren't responsible for whatever's happening on your ship."

Kln'ash did not appear to have heard him. "I know you want my ship, Captain. It would be a great prize for you, and for the Federation. You are forcing my crew into errors that could be fatal. If you persist in this cowardly form of attack we will be destroyed... and you will have gained nothing."

"We are not attacking you," Kirk repeated. "You are being controlled by the planet we are orbiting, designated by the Federation as Cerus Alpha. It's controlling us as well."

"Don't treat me like a fool, Kirk!" Kln'ash fumed. "It's obvious that nothing is happening to you."

"I knew they wouldn't believe you," McCoy said.

The viewscreen picture suddenly blazed into fire as one of the control systems exploded. Kln'ash was hidden by

a cloud of smoke and debris.

"We've lost visual contact," Uhura said. "Audio is fading too."

"It doesn't matter." Kirk sounded weary. "Even if they believed us it wouldn't make any difference. They're trapped as securely as we are. They can't escape, and neither can we."

The Bird of Prey loomed in the viewscreen, lights flaring along her sides. As the Bridge crew watched another internal explosion rocked her.

Uhura spun her chair round. "Captain, the Klingons are trying to contact us. They've increased their frequency. I think I can get them on audio although it won't be good reception."

"If they want to talk, we'll listen," Kirk said

The harsh Klingon voice crackled with static. "Kirk? I... do not... understand... your weapon, but if you continue to use it I know you will certainly... kill us all." A brief surge of noise and the channel suddenly cleared. "I hope you did not expect me to surrender? I do not intend to allow the Federation to take my ship. We would have fought you like warriors, but you prefer to stab us in the back. You have gained nothing. This ship will self destruct in thirty of your Earth seconds." There was a pause and Kirk could imagine the satisfaction on the Klingon Commander's face. "Our secrets go with us, Kirk!"

The Bird of Prey lurched as another detonation shook her. Then a violent yellow light grew from her centre, spreading like a brilliant stain. The yellow became red, and twisted into a pulsing sphere that suddenly exploded like a terrible firework.

The Bird of Prey disintegrated. Streamers of gaseous fire sprayed into space. Shock waves tipped the Enterprise sideways. Where the Klingon ship had been suddenly there was nothing, just the slow whirl of debris spiralling into eternity, a fleeting monument to Klingon honour, an epitaph to Klingon scientific endeavour, a brief shadow on the darkness of space. And then the viewscreen once again showed a silent tapestry of peaceful stars.

"Captain," Spock said. He sounded very tired. "I feel... nothing."

"You're right." Kirk turned to McCoy. "Agreed, Bones? It's gone. Philos... the Entity... it's gone. We're free."

"D'you think it's... dead?" McCoy wondered. "Or just injured?"

"If you wish to use the analogy of drug addiction, which I believe to be appropriate," Spock said, "I would say the explosion, and the accumulated emotion involved in the extinction of so many Klingon lives at once, proved too great for the entity to accept."

"An overdose?" McCoy said.

"I believe that is the term, Doctor."

Kirk punched the controls. "Mr Scott... can you hear me?"

"Aye, sir." Scott's voice was clear and somewhat aggrieved. "I can hear you. What happened? It feels as if someone hit me."

"I suppose in a way someone did," Kirk smiled. "Now, Mr Scott, how fast can we get away from here?"

"I can give you warp speed shortly, Captain," Scott said. "If I'm allowed to work without any unexpected

interruptions, you understand? Until then I can only offer you space normal."

"Then it'll have to be space normal," Kirk said, "but let's travel, Scotty. I'm rather tired of the view around here."

He was aware of Spock moving behind him and turned. The sight of his First Officer's ravaged face shocked him, and he realised that he knew how Spock was feeling, knew it with an understanding that came from empathy. "Mr Spock," he said gently, "I think you need time to... recuperate."

"I believe I am fit to resume my duties," Spock said formally.

"You look terrible," McCoy said tactlessly. "Come down to Sickbay and I'll give you a shot of something..."

"I am needed on the Bridge, Doctor."

"We don't want you collapsing again," McCoy persisted, ignoring the look that Kirk was giving him. "Let me help you, Spock. Don't be so damned stubborn."

Again Kirk sensed Spock's feelings, the small jab of shame at having shown weakness. For Spock there were no excuses.

"Mr Chekov is coping admirably at the science station." Kirk saw Chekov beam at this unexpected praise. He also knew Spock was tightening himself into his Vulcan shell. He added bluntly, "Either you go to your quarters to rest, Mr Spock, or I'll order you to Sickbay for a complete medical check... and a course of medication."

"I will go to my quarters, Captain," Spock said promptly.

"I thought you would," Kirk smiled.

"And don't come back to the Bridge again until you look healthily... green."

EPILOGUE

"You know what I'm talking about, don't you, Spock?" McCoy faced the Vulcan in the privacy of his cabin. "It's a legacy from that damned planet... and it's also damned uncomfortable."

"I am aware of your discomfort, Doctor," Spock nodded.

"You've lived with this kind of thing all your life, Spock. How do you stand it?"

"I am a Vulcan," Spock said simply. "I have been taught to shield my mind from external intrusion. Vulcan training is quite strict in these matters, and begins early. You have not had these advantages. My previous experience of this phenomenon in Humans leads me to believe that your unwanted telepathic ability will fade quite soon."

"I sure hope so," McCoy said. "It's no fun at all picking up these stray... feelings. But I've got to know what's wrong with Jim. He won't talk, but every time I go near him I feel this... pain. I'm supposed to be a Doctor, but he won't let me help him. He thinks I'll order him to take a psych-scan."

"Drastic measures, Doctor. Would you do such a thing?"

"If I had to," McCoy said. "If I thought his mental condition was affecting his ability to command."

"But it is not?"

"Not yet," McCoy warned. "I want to sort it out before it does."

"Why do you think the Captain will talk freely to me?"

McCoy snapped, "Because you're his friend, dammit."

Spock's eyebrow rose. "I am the Captain's First Officer."

"Don't be a stiff-necked Vulcan, Spock," McCoy said angrily. "The word is friend and you damn well know it even if you find it so difficult to admit out loud. Go and talk to him. Find out what's wrong. I've tried and failed. Now it's your turn."

Spock thought about it, but not for very long. "I shall do my best, Doctor, but I cannot force the Captain to confide in me."

"Just try," McCoy said. As Spock turned to leave he added, "And Spock, something's hurting Jim. Try to be... tactful."

Spock looked faintly affronted. "Have I ever appeared to be lacking in tact, Doctor?"

"Yes," McCoy said. "Just don't lecture him, Spock. He needs... understanding."

Both Spock's eyebrows rose at that. He looked remote and Vulcan. McCoy watched the door swish shut behind him.

"I hope I've done the right thing," he muttered, and did not sound convinced.

Spock knew he would find Kirk in his cabin. He knocked and entered. Kirk looked up from his personal computer screen.

"Well, Mr Spock, what does Doctor

McCoy want you to say to me?"

Spock's expression was almost a smile. "I shall be very glad when the effects of Cerus Alpha wear off, Captain. I find even a small amount of telepathic ability disconcerting in Humans."

"The effects?" Kirk repeated. His face darkened. "Yes. I won't be sorry to lose them either." He switched the computer off. "But what about the memories, Spock?"

"Captain," Spock said, "the Cerus Alpha affair is over. The planet is quarantined. You have put in your report. The scans that Mr Chekov made will reveal some valuable information about the Klingon Bird of Prey." He paused and added softly, "It's over, Jim. All of it. If you still have memories you must put them in their correct perspective. They are memories of illusions, nothing more."

"Wrong," Kirk said. "They're more than that." He turned away suddenly. "Spock, when we were down on that planet, caught in those illusions, we still acted in character, didn't we? Philos just showed us depths in ourselves that we don't usually acknowledge."

Spock nodded. "I would say that is essentially a correct assessment, Captain."

"So if I... killed... someone while taking part in one of those illusions, it actually reflected the way I would behave if the situation was real?"

Spock knew he was being set up but Vulcan ethics forbade him to lie. He tried to think of a way round the problem.

"Answer yes or no," Kirk added, "don't try and wriggle."

Spock raised one eyebrow. "Yes," he

said.

"I killed," Kirk said. "I killed Uhura and Chapel. To save the Enterprise, to save her crew. The Enterprise was dying. There were no alternatives. But I killed them... my friends. I shot them in cold blood." His voice rose. "Is this what I'm capable of in real life? Is this the kind of man I am?"

Spock stared at Kirk, his dark eyes expressionless. "If you were *not* capable of such a decision, Captain, you would be unfit to command a Starship."

"So you approve?" Kirk challenged.

"It is not a question of approval, Captain. If the situation was as you describe it, to exchange two lives for over four hundred would be both correct and logical."

"I killed two women, and that was... correct and logical?"

"You did not kill anyone," Spock said. "Lieutenant Uhura and Nurse Chapel are still alive."

Kirk twisted round and slammed his fist on the table, startling even Spock's Vulcan calm.

"Don't patronise me, Mr Spock! You just agreed that we acted in character during the illusions. I believed I was seeing the real Enterprise. I believed I was seeing the real Uhura and the real Chapel. I believed I held a real phaser..." His voice broke. "I killed them, both of them. To save my ship." His normally bright eyes were dulled with internal pain. "Would I have done the same thing... in real life?"

"I trust so, Captain," Spock said simply. He added, "If it was the only command decision open to you."

"And what would you have done?" Kirk demanded. "In my position?"

"The same as you, Captain," Spock said promptly.

"That's easy to say," Kirk looked down at his hands as if inspecting them for blood, "but you didn't have to do it."

"Captain," Spock said, "you have not yet recovered from the effects of Cerus Alpha. Your mind and your emotions have been stretched to abnormal limits. When you are fully recovered you will not agonise so badly over this matter."

"I keep forgetting," Kirk said dully. "Vulcans don't look at death in the same way as weak emotional Humans. If you had to sacrifice Uhura and Chapel, wouldn't you you have agonised over it afterwards?"

"I would have tried to see it in its correct perspective, Captain. That is what you must do."

Kirk looked directly at Spock. "Would you have sacrificed me, Mr Spock?"

"I know that you would give your life willingly for the safety of the Enterprise and her crew, Captain. You have demonstrated that many times in the past."

"You don't get out of it that easily," Kirk said. "Let me hear you say it, Spock. You would have killed me to save the Enterprise."

"I would have killed you to save the Enterprise," Spock said.

They stared at each other.

"And not agonised over it

afterwards?" Kirk added.

The pause was longer this time.

"Not even a little?" Kirk persisted quietly.

Spock turned to him and the set lines of his face softened briefly. The dark eyes that tried hard not to be the window of his soul held an expression Kirk had never seen before.

"I do not know how I would feel... afterwards," he said. His voice broke slightly. He checked it. "I am not even sure that I could live with such a burden."

They sat together without speaking. Finally Kirk said, "Spock... was it very bad for you?"

Spock did not reply, but Kirk suddenly felt a sensation of loneliness, of desolation, of bereavement, a sensation so strong it was an almost physical pain. He knew it came from Spock but he was uncertain if the sharing was intentional. He was filled with an intense desire to help, but it seemed like an intrusion into the Vulcan's secret heart, an intrusion he was not willing to risk without an invitation. He made a deliberate effort to blank his mind but the memory lingered, as if Spock did indeed welcome his presence and found comfort in this brief bonding, comfort in the knowledge that someone understood.

"It was bad," Kirk confirmed softly.

They sat for a little longer in silence. There was no need for words. The affection that joined them needed no external confirmation. Kirk felt his mind calming and knew that his own silence was having a similar effect on Spock. With the last lingering residue of his telepathic ability he sensed Spock returning to the protection of his Vulcan

shell. He understood that Spock needed this disguise. But he had briefly seen beyond it, and he also knew that no other Human had been permitted to do this before.

"Well, Mr Spock," he said finally, "perhaps something worthwhile came out of the Cerus Alpha affair after all."

"An increase in self knowledge is always worthwhile, Captain," Spock agreed.

The communicator beeped suddenly.

"Captain?" It was Uhura's voice. "You're wanted on the Bridge, sir. Starfleet require more clarification on Cerus Alpha."

Kirk sighed. Spock was staring at him gravely, his face an unreadable Vulcan mask. But Kirk was aware that they had shared something and gained something. And neither of them would ever forget the experience.

"Do you know what I think, Jim?" Doctor McCoy had come to the Bridge in an argumentative mood.

"I'm happy to say that I don't," Kirk said. "From now on I'm leaving telepathy to the Vulcans."

"I think Spock should come clean."

Spock raised a surprised eyebrow. "I do not understand you, Doctor."

"Down there on Cerus Alpha," McCoy explained, "when we were helping you with our... er... flights of fancy. If you'd been in our position Spock, what would you have... imagined?"

"I fail to see the relevance of this information, Doctor."

McCoy said, "I'm curious."

"A Human failing," Spock nodded.

"You're a scientist," McCoy argued, "and you're trying to say you've never been curious?"

"Doctor, there is a difference between scientific curiosity and personal prying."

"I'm not prying," McCoy objected. "This is psychological research. I could end up writing a paper on Vulcan Leisure and Pleasure."

Spock treated him to a look of cool disapproval. Kirk spun his chair towards his Vulcan First Officer.

"I must say, I'm a little bit curious too," he admitted. "I just can't imagine you with... well..." He caught Spock's look and finished lamely, "...in the same position that you nearly found us."

The rest of the Bridge crew were listening intently now although they were trying to disguise it. Spock put his hands behind his back and sighed.

"Doctor, if it will increase your understanding of Vulcans by even a miniscule amount I feel I have a duty to enlighten you. There are many occupations that I find pleasurable. The consideration of the philosophic implications of Farvelle's hypo-curve equation on the space-time continuum is a problem that has always fascinated me, and I have never had the time to pursue it in any depth. Without the use of a computer the calculations would have kept me occupied for a considerable time." He gazed benignly at Kirk and McCoy. "There are other problems of a

mathematical nature that I would find similarly stimulating. Would you like a detailed list, Doctor, for your proposed paper?"

"No, I wouldn't," McCoy said in disgust. "Spock, I reckon that even Philos couldn't dredge up any emotional nightmares out of you. While we were struggling with our personal monsters you were probably wrestling with nothing more frightening than a few equations that wouldn't balance out."

There was a pause. Spock's face remained impassive.

"Doctor," he said gravely, "I advise you not to attempt your paper. It is obvious that you do not understand Vulcans at all."

"Spock," McCoy said, "there was one particular incident down there on Cerus Alpha when I almost thought you'd... well... mellowed. I almost believed the Human half of you was taking over for once. You might say it was a historic moment, Spock."

"You were the victim of an illusion, Doctor," Spock said gravely.

"Maybe I was," McCoy agreed. "But I'll always find the memory quite... fascinating."

Spock's eyebrow went up at that, but he said nothing and after a moment turned and went back to the science station, leaving the rest of the crew, including Captain Kirk, hoping for the explanation that both he and Doctor McCoy knew they were never, ever going to get.

CLASSROOM

The landing party gazed round at an empty expanse of scrubby ground and low outcrops of rock. Two small suns hung like eyes in the pale sky.

"Where's the source of your unusual energy reading, Mr Spock?" Kirk wondered.

Spock adjusted the tricorder. "I have to admit that it does not seem to be apparent, Captain, but the reading remains constant. It is a power source, a large one, and it is underground. Purpose unknown."

"Underground?" Kirk repeated curiously. "How deep?"

Spock made more adjustments. "Less than a metre, and not localised. It is impossible to be more specific with the limited information available on the tricorder."

"Well," Kirk said, "unless you can tell me that it's definitely hostile I think we can beam up and send a survey team down with better equipment. Not," he added, looking at the boring landscape rolling outwards towards the equally uninteresting horizon, "that there seems much for them to survey."

"The energy levels are not life threatening," Spock confirmed. He paused and added conversationally, "We are, however, currently being scanned by a non-living mechanism. Readings indicate considerable size. Direction east at one point eight."

Kirk and the security team did a three hundred and sixty degree turn.

"There's nothing there," Kirk said.

"Moving rapidly," Spock added.

"Phasers on stun," Kirk ordered. "If it's mechanical and it attacks stop it, but don't destroy it unless I give the order."

"Let's hope we get to see it first," Ensign Forbes said softly.

He had forgotten Spock's acute Vulcan hearing.

"Anything that gives readings of mechanical mass, Mr Forbes," the Science Officer said evenly, "is likely to become visible at some point. Current position, one point four and closing."

They all looked around. Still nothing.

"It has stopped, Captain," Spock said. "Readings indicate that certain adjustments are being made." He paused. "Now it is approaching again."

They waited. Kirk had a wild thought that Spock was playing a joke on them. He dismissed it. The Enterprise had been doing a heavy stint of survey duty. Most of the crew - with the exception of the scientists involved - found these tours boring. Kirk was no exception. He needed some R & R. He was getting light headed. A Vulcan playing practical jokes? It would be easier to imagine a sun icing over.

"Why are you all standing in the wrong location?" a strident metallic voice demanded. "You should have gathered two thralls to the helicon."

A small object fussed up to Kirk's feet. It resembled a dull coloured ladybird about two feet long with several aeri-
als

on its domed back. Its voice was surprisingly loud for its size.

"Answer me at once," it bullied, spinning away to inspect the security team who watched it in amazement. "I have adjusted to your speech patterns. Why do you not answer? Surely you can understand me?"

"We do not understand the terms threll or helicon," Spock explained.

"Do not make excuses," the beetle said. "It is ill-mannered to be unpunctual."

"Is this the large mechanical object that's been stalking us?" Kirk asked.

"It gives readings of mass in excess of its size," Spock admitted.

"How did it manage to creep up on us?"

"A form of matter transference," Spock said, consulting the tricorder. "Fascinating."

"You are wasting time." The beetle extended an antenna. "Time is very valuable. Class must commence." The antenna began to vibrate. The beetle made an irritated clicking noise. "You are not the pupils I was expecting, but as you are here I must teach you. I require two pupils. Which of you have been selected?"

"We are not pupils," Kirk said. "I am Captain James Kirk of the Starship Enterprise."

"Are you a selected pupil?"

"None of us are pupils," Kirk tried again. "We are a preliminary survey team from the Starship Enterprise."

The beetle clicked loudly. Another antenna raised itself. There was a faint humming sound. Kirk saw the security men stagger against each other, looks of extreme surprise on their faces. He saw Spock's knees buckle. And then he blacked out.

The first thing Kirk saw when he came to was Spock seated in a straight backed meditation pose watching the immobile beetle. Then he realised that his phaser and communicator were gone and the security team had disappeared.

As soon as he moved the beetle came to life.

"Now you are both ready to join the class. Teaching will begin."

"Not so fast." Kirk stood up. "Where are my men?"

There was a slight hesitation. The beetle clicked to itself.

"Your playmates have been returned to your vehicle."

Kirk glanced quickly at Spock who made a slight movement that could have been a shrug.

"I received the same answer, Captain."

"Return my communicator to me," Kirk ordered.

The beetle clicked again.

"Your toys will be returned when the lesson is over. I will also release the vehicle that brought you here."

"The Enterprise?" Kirk said. "I want it released now. And my property

returned to me."

"Don't be argumentative," the beetle reprimanded. "You are here to learn. I will teach you. You do not need any distractions."

"What if I refuse to join the class?" Kirk asked.

"You will be punished."

Spock tipped his head sideways.

"An outdated approach to teaching, Captain."

"What makes you think we're your pupils?" Kirk persisted.

"You are here," the beetle said simply. "You are not what I expected but changes in schedule are not uncommon."

"But why just us? Why not the men who were with me as well?"

"They did not fit the criteria for this lesson. Maybe another teacher would be suitable for them. You are two hundred and sixteen on the Bala Scale. Subjectivity strong but controlled. Objectivity strong but in need of enhancement. Your friend is three hundred and sixty on the Bala Scale. Subjectivity most commendably low. Objectivity on ninety nine scale, almost total. I am not sure that you are a good partnership and you are both very young, but no doubt there is a reason for you being sent here together. Now, you will wait here while I check on your assignment details." It scurried off towards the rocks.

"What's this Bala Scale?" Kirk wondered.

"I do not know, Captain. Perhaps some kind of intelligence rating."

"I seem pretty low on it," Kirk observed rather crossly. "Two hundred and sixteen to your three hundred and sixty."

"I do not see why it should upset you, Captain," Spock said mildly. "Perhaps you can draw some comfort from the fact that an eminent psychologist once said that when he called a man intelligent he was describing him, not praising him."

Kirk gave Spock a look that clearly said he derived no comfort from that at all.

"And this 'objectivity needs enhancement'?" he persisted. "I don't like the sound of that either."

"It simply means that you are too emotional, Captain," Spock explained. "It is to be expected, in Humans."

"Since you and that mechanical bug both seem to agree on your superiority," Kirk said with exaggerated politeness, "perhaps you'd like to explain to me exactly what's going on?"

"Getting angry with me will not alter things, Captain."

"I am not getting angry...." Kirk realised his voice was rising and checked it, "...with you, Mr Spock. Just give me your opinion. If possible based on your ninety nine scale objectivity."

Spock put his hands behind his back and took a brief moment to arrange his thoughts.

"Quite obviously, Captain, we have landed in some kind of school. If the Bala Scale is an indication of our intellectual ability the robot obviously considers us to be children. It has not seen anything like us before but it seems to have scanned

your mind, which was probably more accessible than mine, and has adjusted itself to your speech patterns and memories. It is therefore treating us just as one of your Earth junior school teachers would have treated you when you were a child."

"What's it going to teach us?" Kirk wondered. "The alphabet?"

"Possibly," Spock said. "Or perhaps some simple arithmetical computations." He added gravely and with no apparent change of expression, "Don't worry, Captain. If you have difficulties during the lesson I will endeavour to assist you."

It was one of those rare moments when Kirk sensed a subtle change in Spock, as if both the Vulcan and the Starfleet officer were relaxing slightly and Spock was releasing a tiny portion of his Human half, letting it sample the kind of friendship that other crew members took for granted. It only happened when they were alone and Kirk suspected that no one else so far been accorded this privilege. He was secretly flattered, but guessed instinctively that if he commented on it or even appeared to notice it Spock would retreat into his Vulcan shell and take a very long time to venture out again.

"So if we just behave like good children and do as we're told," he suggested, "we'll be given our communicators and our phasers back and sent off home?"

"If we are lucky," Spock agreed, "I believe that is what will happen."

"If we're lucky?" Kirk repeated. "Why shouldn't we be lucky?"

"The robot is designed to teach aliens. It did not expect us. It may not have even have access to concepts that

we understand."

"In that case," Kirk guessed cheerfully, "it won't want to waste its time with us. We'll get home even quicker."

The beetle scurried back to them. Kirk felt almost pleased to see it. It was like a toy, nothing to be bothered about. Let it run through its fixed programme, annoying as the delay might be, he and Spock would still be back on the Enterprise in time for their duty break and a game of chess.

"I have checked your assignment," the beetle confirmed. "You seem young, but my place is to teach not question. Yours is to learn. Now, you are soft and squashy and appear to have no natural defences. Which weapons can I provide for you?"

Kirk's smile disappeared.

"Weapons?" he repeated.

"You do not intend to grapple with your..... appendages?" It whirled and clicked in obvious annoyance. "Really, this lack of information is quite intolerable. How can I perform my function?" It spun up to Spock. "Do your appendages contain sheathed claws?"

"No," Spock said. "They are simply....hands."

"Hands?" It obviously did some checking. "These are capable of grasping. Therefore you are capable of using a weapon. Which weapon do you prefer?"

"We don't want weapons," Kirk said. "We're here to learn, not fight."

"Confusion!" The beetle spun around then stopped suddenly. "But you are very young. I have explained badly.

Now listen. Of course you are here to learn. You are also here to fight. You are here to learn to fight."

Kirk looked at Spock. Spock raised an eyebrow.

"We don't want to fight," Kirk said.

"Nonsense," the beetle objected. "Why else would you come here?"

"This is a martial arts school?" Kirk asked.

"This is the place to learn to fight," the beetle said. "I will teach you. Chose a weapon."

"It seems you won't have to help me with my sums after all, Mr Spock," Kirk said. "What weapon are you going to have?"

"I would prefer not to have any, Captain."

"We'll have to play along with this," Kirk said. "You've taught me some Vulcan combat in the gym. What's the difference? Sulu's been teaching me to fence. Fancy a duel?"

"I have never felt happy with a sword, Captain."

"No, you prefer those sneaky locks and throws," Kirk agreed. "Not to mention nerve pinches. But you'll just have to pretend, Mr Spock."

"I do not wish to fight, Captain."

"A bit of play acting," Kirk said, "and then we can both go home."

"You are wasting time," the beetle hassled. "Time is valuable. Which weapon do you prefer?"

"It seems my friend doesn't want to co-operate," Kirk said. "Sorry, but we've decided not to attend your lesson after all."

"You are being naughty," the beetle said. "If you are naughty I shall punish you. One last chance. Which weapon? Tell me!"

Suddenly Kirk felt irritated by the hectoring mechanical voice. "Understand this," he said, "we're not children, whatever you think, and we don't intend to do as you tell us. We..."

It felt as if a barbed hand was tightening round his heart. He choked and clawed at his chest. His breath rasped. He doubled over and hit the ground. Spock made a move to catch him and found himself immobilised

"You must not help him," the beetle chided. "He has had several warnings. Now he will behave." It waited a few moments then circled Kirk. "Now then, don't slack. Stand up."

Kirk was still writhing. Spock said, "He is hurt."

"Hurt? That was Reprimand Three. Reprimand Three does not hurt. He is malingering. If he does not get up I shall punish him again. We are wasting time."

Kirk sensed Spock was going to object. He pushed himself onto his knees.

"I'm all right, Spock." He stood, swaying. Spock also found that he could move again. Kirk breathed deeply. His ribs felt sore. "That's a punishment for a child?"

"An alien child," Spock said. "I do not think this robot fully understands the real difference between us and whatever species it normally teaches. Its functions

are limited. But it will obey its programme. Either we fight, or we'll be punished. And if that is Reprimand Three I do not advise sampling Reprimand Two or One."

"Chose your weapons," the beetle shrielled.

"Spock," Kirk remembered, "we've tied computers in knots before...."

"This is not strictly a computer," Spock said. "Because it is relatively unsophisticated it is less likely to respond to logical argument. In fact I do not think it will respond at all. It...."

The beetle interrupted him. "You are too talkative. You are here to learn."

"I was merely explaining...." Spock began.

"Do not explain," the beetle objected crossly. "How can you presume to explain? You are only a Bala Scale three hundred and sixty."

Despite himself Kirk grinned. "Only, Mr Spock? I wonder how high the Bala Scale goes?"

"Chose your weapons," the beetle insisted, nudging at their feet. "You are wasting time. I have not had such naughty pupils before. Chose, or you will be punished."

"Staves," Kirk said.

Spock lifted an eyebrow: "Staves, Captain?"

"Staves," Kirk repeated. He pointed at the beetle. "You know what staves are, don't you?"

"Long poles cut from a vegetation indigenous to your home planet," the

beetle rattled off after only a moment's clicking pause. "You wish to fight with these?"

"Yes," Kirk said.

"No," Spock objected.

Kirk said rapidly, "If we don't fight, we get punished. With staves we can smash about and make it look good, and if we do it long enough and loud enough we might just satisfy this little mechanical busybody and get our communicators back."

Spock considered that and nodded.

"Logical, Captain. I shall not, however, enjoy it."

"No-one's asking you to enjoy it," Kirk said irritably. "Just try and make it look real."

Two metallic staves appeared suddenly on the ground.

"Fascinating," Spock stared at them. "Instant transference of matter. The power under this planet's surface is quite considerable, Captain, as my high readings indicated."

"I regret these are not made of vegetable matter," the beetle apologised, "but I believe they will serve?"

Kirk picked one up. It was light, smooth and well balanced. He whirled it round, testing.

"It'll do," he said. "Now then, Mr Spock, prepare to defend yourself."

"Captain," Spock said reproachfully, picking up the other staff, "I believe you are finding this amusing."

"Whatever makes you think that?"

Kirk grinned. "Tell me if I hit you too hard."

They circled each other warily. The beetle spun round them, deftly avoiding their feet. Kirk made a couple of experimental attacks. Spock avoided them.

"You're allowed to strike back," Kirk said. "I'll forget that I'm your superior officer... for now."

They circled again. Spock barely managed to block Kirk's next assault.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this," Kirk said.

The next moment Spock did something fast and complicated and Kirk hit the ground with a thud that winded him. When he tried to get up he found the end of Spock's staff pushing against his stomach.

"I believe, Captain," Spock said politely, "that I am getting the hang of it also."

The beetle was delighted. "Excellent. Good co-ordination. Excellent."

Kirk got up. "I thought Vulcans were supposed to be pacifists, Mr Spock?"

"We are, Captain," Spock agreed. "I am simply play acting, as you suggested."

"No slacking!" the beetle hectored, fussing round their feet. "Off you go again!"

They stalked each other, avoided each other, blocked and turned. Wrestled, staff against staff, locked into a stalemate and broke apart. The beetle pursued them, weaving between their feet and miraculously never getting in their way, giving advice, praise and encouragement.

Kirk did not know how long they fought. He only knew his own movements were slowing down and Spock was slowing with him. He guessed Spock was doing it deliberately. The Vulcan's strength and endurance were far higher than any Human. By the time the beetle called, "Enough! Rest time! Rest time!" Kirk was staggering.

"Very good," the beetle enthused. Two flagons of liquid appeared. "I have brought you refreshment."

Kirk wiped the sweat off his face. "Just bring our communicators," he said. "Our toys."

"After the lesson," the beetle promised.

"We've finished the lesson."

"Of course you have," the beetle agreed, "but now you must take the test."

"What test?" Kirk demanded.

"After the lesson you take the test," the beetle explained, "and then the victor can have the toys and return to the vehicle."

"And what does the loser do," Kirk wondered, "take the test again?"

The beetle twirled round on the spot, a manoeuvre Kirk now recognised as indicating annoyance.

"The loser will be dead," it said, "obviously. Now," it fussed round them benevolently, "after you are refreshed we will begin."

"Captain," Spock said quietly, "we cannot delay indefinitely."

The beetle seemed to agree. It clicked round them importantly. "Come now. This is the final test. On your feet, please."

Kirk and Spock faced each other.

"I want no part of this charade," Kirk said angrily. "A fight to the death? It's absurd."

"The teacher does not think so," Spock said mildly.

"I refuse to fight!"

"You were quite happy to do so a short while ago."

"That was different," Kirk argued. "And whose side are you on, anyway?"

"Captain," Spock said, "if we do not fight I believe we will both die."

"Fight!" the beetle commanded, adding in confirmation of Spock's prediction, "or you will be punished. Reprimand One. You will not like Reprimand One!"

"I do not think we will survive Reprimand One, Captain," Spock observed academically.

Knowing there was no alternative they stalked each other slowly, attacking and parrying with such obvious reluctance that Kirk knew the beetle would soon intervene. He was right.

It circled round their feet, bullying stridently.

"Fight. You must fight! If you do not fight you will be punished!"

Kirk swung at Spock. There was no real aggression in the move. Spock blocked easily and returned the attack

with such a marked lack of enthusiasm that the beetle hurtled towards him angrily.

"You are not trying. If you do not try you will be punished!"

Kirk closed in. The two Starfleet officers pushed staff against staff in a mock trial of strength that they both knew would not fool the beetle for long.

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, "I can't think of anything except how much I want to smash this stick over that mechanical busybody's antennae!"

"Inadvisable, Captain," Spock said. "We are undoubtedly being monitored by whatever lifeform controls the beetle. Destroying it would solve nothing. It would simply be replaced."

"Stop talking," beetle ordered irritably. "Fight!"

"Haven't you any bright ideas?" Kirk muttered. "There must be a logical answer to this problem?"

"As a matter of fact, Captain," Spock said agreeably, "I believe there is."

Kirk pushed against him, still trying to make the fight look real, and Spock fell. It was totally unexpected. Kirk stared down at him in amazement.

"You have won, Captain," Spock said politely from the ground.

"Get up," Kirk said.

"You are the victor, Captain."

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, "get up. That's an order."

The beetle circled Spock and prodded him experimentally.

"You are still alive," it observed in surprise.

"Affirmative," Spock agreed.

The beetle spun round to Kirk.

"I am perplexed," it admitted. "I thought you would be the loser."

"Stand up, Spock," Kirk said.

"You must complete the fight," the beetle insisted. "Kill, please. Then I will give you your toys back."

Kirk threw the staff away. He reached forward and grabbed Spock by the shirt.

"Damn it, Spock, stand up when I tell you."

The beetle clicked frantically.

"This is unprecedented. Kill! You must kill!"

In a fury Kirk let go of Spock, shot his foot out and sent the beetle skidding sideways.

"Captain," Spock warned. When Kirk leaned forward again he added softly, "One of us must die, Jim. One is preferable to two."

"I make the decisions round here, Commander Spock," Kirk said. "And I give the orders. I've just given you one. Obey it."

The beetle scurried up to Spock, clicking.

"You are not damaged. This is unprecedented."

"I am the loser," Spock said.

"No he isn't," Kirk insisted. "He fell over on purpose. That's cheating."

"On purpose?" This was obviously outside the beetle's scope. "Why would he do that? To fall is to be vanquished. To be vanquished is to die. No-one dies through choice. If he chose to fall, he chose to die. This is unprecedented."

"Of course it's unprecedented," Kirk said. "It's irrational. He's mad. You can't kill a madman. It's inhumane."

"Really, Captain," Spock said in mild reproof, "you are only prolonging the inevitable."

"He cannot be mad," the beetle said. "He has a Bala Scale of three hundred and sixty."

"That's not very high," Kirk argued.

"True," the beetle agreed, "but it is not the scale of a mental defective. He is sane. You are sane. One of you must die. The one who has fallen must die. You must kill him. Proceed."

"No," Kirk said.

"But that is why you are here,"

"I will not kill to order," Kirk said. "I will not kill for fun. I will not kill my friend."

The beetle spun over to Spock.

"He will not complete the lesson. He has admitted cowardice. You will kill him."

"No," Spock said.

"Yes!" If the beetle could have physically hopped up and down with anger it would probably have done so. "There must be a victor and there must a

vanquished. Those are the rules. You will kill him."

Spock stood up. "No," he said again,

The beetle clicked desperately.

"You are both of an inferior race. You are cowardly. You will not obey the rules." More clicking. "There must be a rule to cover this situation. I think you will both die. That would be a fitting punishment."

"It would seem that your emotionalism is going to deprive the Enterprise of her commanding officer after all," Spock said mildly.

"What about your emotionalism?" Kirk countered.

Spock looked surprised. "I was not aware that I had displayed any,"

"You fell down on purpose."

"That is your interpretation, Captain."

The beetle nudged their feet. "I have consulted the rules. There is a precedent. You will both die. I shall administer Reprimand One until such time as all life indications have ceased within your bodies. You," it tapped Spock with an antenna, "will die first as you are technically the loser of the test fight."

Kirk moved forward. "Just a minute..." And then froze. He felt no pain but he was immobilised.

"You will wait," the beetle said unnecessarily.

It turned in a circle and Spock watched it, one eyebrow slightly raised. Then his body suddenly twisted. It arched backwards and he fell. His face contorted

and he screamed. The scream shocked Kirk most of all. He knew that Vulcan pride would keep Spock silent beyond the limits of any pain a Human could bear. He could not even begin to understand Spock's agony.

A melodious voice said briefly, "Cancel!"

Spock's body relaxed. He lay on his back, unmoving.

The voice added, "Resuscitate!"

The beetle hurried forward and fussed round Spock, tapping him with various extending antennae. Spock's eyes opened.

"Release the companion lifeform!"

Kirk found he could move again. Spock was trying to stand up. Kirk was next to him in three strides.

Spock raised a warning hand. "I do not need assistance, Captain."

Kirk caught his arm and supported him. "I've had enough of your damn pride, Mr Spock. You'll take help when it's offered, whether you want it or not."

"Pride, Captain?" Spock sounded mildly offended. "I hope I have not indulged in any such emotion." He stared at something over Kirk's shoulder. "Captain, if you would turn around....."

Kirk turned. He knew he would see the owner of the voice that he now realised existed only in his head, but the sheer size and alien-ness of the being shocked him. It towered over him, its insectoid body burnished like copper, shining and armoured. Eight jointed legs supported it. A massive head with jagged mandibles swung to look at him. Kirk found himself staring into huge amber

eyes.

"I trust your companion is fully recovered?"

The voice was so unlike the creature's appearance that it was difficult to believe that this gigantic creature was actually speaking. But the eyes convinced Kirk. They were calm and strangely compassionate.

"I am unharmed," Spock said.

"The teacher unit must be forgiven," the voice said gently. "It is a mechanoid and fulfils its limited programme. It had no way of understanding that you are not pupils."

"But it was willing to kill us," Kirk said angrily. "What kind of classroom is this?"

"It is a classroom for champions," the voice explained. "This entire planet has been designed for that purpose. I know that you are Captain Kirk and Commander Spock of the Starship Enterprise. You are mapping and exploring in the manner of your kind, but there is nothing for you here. This world is the property of the Tareek. It is used as a teaching area, nothing more."

"We received exceptionally high power readings from the surface," Spock said, "and believed the planet might be inhabited."

"The power source is beneath the surface, Commander Spock. It facilitates matter transference and also gives authority to the teaching units. They need to administer Reprimands. All teachers do this, do they not?"

"But what are you teaching?" Kirk asked.

"Champions," the voice said.

"Champions of what?" Kirk persisted. "Some kind of sport?"

"Sport?" Although he felt nothing Kirk knew the creature was probing his mind for explanations. "Ah, competition for pleasure? For reward? No, we do not indulge in such activities. We teach war champions. The concept of victory by single combat is currently outmoded on your planet, but in your past I believe you had a similar system."

Kirk was amazed. "We gave that idea up centuries ago."

"Such a pity." The alien's voice sounded like a sigh. "Your methods from then on, I believe, involved the destruction of countless innocent lifeforms and often irreplaceable examples of past culture. A cruel and wasteful method of deciding territorial differences."

"We didn't only fight for territory," Kirk objected quickly. "We fought against those who wanted to enslave others. We fought to maintain freedom, to protect those who could not protect themselves."

"Laudable motives, Captain Kirk," the creature agreed, "but while pursuing goals that they no doubt deemed to be unselfish your people have destroyed so much. Our way is more civilised. Only one lifeform is extinguished."

"Perhaps the lifeform involved might see it differently," Kirk suggested.

"No-one is forced to take on the duties of a champion, Captain. But for those who feel the call it is considered a sacred honour." The great head swung round, and the calm golden eyes stared at Kirk. "You are not unaware of the emotions involved in self sacrifice. Your

friend was willing to give his life for yours. He merely anticipated your own actions. You were contemplating a similar sacrifice yourself."

Spock glanced at Kirk and raised an eyebrow. Kirk felt himself blushing and turned away.

"That's different," he said shortly. "As Captain I have certain responsibilities to my crew."

"Duty was only part of your incentive," the singing voice intoned. "You were both motivated by emotions far more noble than a rule book."

"In my case," Spock said quickly, "the motivation was simple logic. The Captain is more valuable to Starfleet than I am."

The head moved slightly and the glowing eyes captured Spock.

"You are refusing to acknowledge your real reasons even to yourself, Commander." The creature paused and Spock felt a warmth flowing through him. "Strange, you understand the group mind, but your patterns are different from ours. I sense that it is not acceptable for me to probe. Forgive me. But Commander, the feelings that prompted you to offer your life for your friend are not ignoble. Why do you try to deny them?"

Spock stared impassively into the depths of the golden eyes. "I do not deny them. You have misinterpreted them."

There was amusement in the alien's voice. "You need not feel embarrassment, Commander. Your Captain has not heard our conversation. However, I will tell you both that I have been observing you for some time. We were of course aware of your presence in orbit and on the surface

of this planet. If I had not discovered these emotions within you I might have hesitated to interfere in the lesson."

"You would have let us die?" Kirk said.

"Like your people, Captain," the creature agreed, "we sometimes find it necessary to eliminate lifeforms that we consider inappropriate to the general well being of our immediate universe. But you have taken the lesson, you are entitled to an assessment. Teacher unit," the beetle scurried forward, "give your report. Are these pupils capable of being trained as champions?"

"They are very young, of low intelligence and fragile," the beetle observed, "but they show promise."

"Both are capable of killing another lifeform?"

"Both are capable," the beetle agreed. "The tall one has suppressed the instinct more deeply," Spock's eyebrow rose at that, "but given treatment to release certain emotions he would make a better champion than his companion. He has excellent control and his Bala Scale is higher."

"I'm sick of hearing about that damned Bala scale," Kirk muttered.

"My own brief assessment would seem to confirm that both are capable of acting as the legal participants in a decision by combat," the alien confirmed. "Neither would enjoy the kill, but given sufficient emotional motivation they would perform as their duties demanded." The great head swung round again. "In that respect, Captain Kirk and Commander Spock, your people and mine have something in common. Philosophically, however, I sense that we are far apart. But I am sure you do not

wish to remain here and train with us. Teacher unit, return the equipment taken from these lifeforms." The beetle scurried off. "Captain," the sonorous voice echoed in Kirk's head, "there will be no point in returning here. Your limited Starship could not reach our home world even if you knew where to find us. If you return you will discover a deserted planet. We will find another classroom. Do you understand?"

"Can there be no communication between our people?" Kirk asked. "Perhaps we could learn from each other?"

"I think not, Captain. I foresee more disagreements than harmony. Maybe in the future.... All things are possible within the wheel of time."

The beetle dropped the communicators at Kirk's feet. "Your toys," it said, with a hint of pique.

The burnished alien watched Kirk flip the communicator open. "May you find wisdom and peace in your heart, Captain Kirk."

Kirk was startled. All he could manage was, "Thank you."

Spock, with his usual dignity, raised his hand and said in Vulcan, "Live long and prosper."

The alien bowed its head.

A few moments later the two Starfleet officers were back on the Enterprise.

They were one day out from the classroom planet when Kirk's curiosity finally got the better of him. He caught up with Spock in the corridor.

"Mr Spock," he said cheerfully, "I've been meaning to ask you.... did it shock you to be told that you're still very close to your primitive past?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "I do not understand you, Captain."

"You understand me, Spock," Kirk grinned. "How did you feel about being assessed as suitable material for a champion?"

"I believe my feelings were similar to yours when you heard of your assessment on the Bala Scale, Captain," Spock said.

"You were angry, Mr Spock?" Kirk wondered.

"I considered the assessment inaccurate, Captain."

"But was it?"

"In your case?" Spock asked mildly. "Or mine?"

"We don't know anything about the Bala Scale, Mr Spock, so we can't judge my case."

"It would be easy enough to find out," Spock suggested. "I am sure I could programme the computer with sufficient data from other cultures to draw some relevant conclusions."

"I think that would be a waste of time," Kirk said.

"I believe that speculating on whether I have retained any of my ancestors' more unpleasant instincts would be an equal waste of time, Captain."

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, "that sounds very much like attempted blackmail."

Spock managed to imply that he was shocked while still retaining his impassive expression.

"Really, Captain, such a course of action would never occur to me."

"Not even prompted by some of those unpleasant instincts inherited from your past, Mr Spock?"

"Not from my *Vulcan* past," Spock said. He considered for a moment. "Maybe from my Human half. It is often a source of embarrassment to me. However, as I am still very young it is possible that I will soon outgrow these deficiencies, just as it is equally possible, Captain, that your Bala Scale will also improve with time."

He nodded politely and continued down the corridor with long strides, leaving James T Kirk still trying to think of an appropriate reply.

